GIORDANO BERTI - ANTONIO LUPATELLI
TRANSLATED BY BING

TAROT OF THE GNOMES

LO SCARABEO

BETWEEN MYTH AND LEGEND

BETWEEN HISTORY AND LEGEND

Series directed by
Pietro Alligo and Giordano Berti

TAROT OF THE GNOMES

Fairy tales, games and magic from the world of Esir

LO SCARABEO
BETWEEN HISTORY AND LEGEND

THE TAROT OF THE GNOMES

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To the gnome
within us

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PROLOGUE

This is the story of a strange game, a deck of tiny cards invented by none other than a gnome. I came into possession of them many years ago, when I was a kid. At that time there was a small shop of a second-hand dealer, in an alley not far from my house. It was a little room with peeling walls and a rickety floor, but I considered it a kind of magic box. There were ceramic dolls, phonographs, music boxes, old biscuit boxes, broken pendulums, oil lamps... in short, a quantity of useless dusty relics that emanated the charm of ancient fairy tales.

The owner of the shop had recently settled in the neighborhood, and immediately intrigued me by his mysterious appearance. He was a bizarre old man with a curved back and a nose as big as a pear. He had long, white hair that fell to his neck, and a pointed beard that he caressed continuously with two fingers as he looked suspiciously at his customers. His bushy eyebrows gave him a grim look, but when I met him, I discovered that he had a very jovial character.

He loved to invent riddles and charades, or sing nice tongue-twisting nursery rhymes. But he had even more fun, while talking to customers, to leave them stunned with some sleight of hand. For example, he would pull an egg out from behind his ear and drink it on the spot. Or, from a small pipe he took out dozens of objects, such as handkerchiefs, cigarettes and playing cards. In addition, he had scattered a number of things in the room that he called "mirrors for larks" and every now and then, taking advantage of the half-light and disorder, he sold them to the customer for what they really were not: a tree bark for an African mask; a stone with particular contours for a remnant of a marble bust; an old blackened frying pan for an Etruscan mirror, and so on. Then, when

the customer approached and discovered the deception, the old man burst into a shrill grin.

Despite these childish attitudes, the second-hand dealer possessed a vast culture that he said he had acquired in his wanderings from one corner of the earth to the other. I gladly stopped to listen to his stories about the customs of this or that primitive people, about the different ways of living, dying, and playing. Yes, because the old man's great passion was to play, and above all to collect games.

"Games," he said, "are not made just to entertain. They can be instructive, and stimulate a person's intelligence and imagination. They can awaken dormant faculties and lead, through ecstasy or dream, to unknown dimensions."

I didn't understand what he meant, but he said not to worry, that one day maybe I would understand.

Once he invited me to visit what he considered one of the wonders of the world: his collection. As soon as I set foot in the house I was literally amazed. Everywhere I turned there was nothing but games. Mechanical and wire puppets, ancient chessboards, globes of non-existent lands, miniature castles, card games, goose games and games with curious names such as as-nas, mah-jong, tric trac, aliossi, mancalà, and an infinite number of other things that I had never seen. Everything intrigued me, but I couldn't stop to observe a game that immediately another caught my attention. Each object told a story and another continued it, subtly sneaking into the thin plot built by my imagination.

I wandered through the rooms with a dazed air, as if I were in the grip of a spell. I was so confused and excited that I even crashed into the junk dealer. He smiled amicably and continued his occupation. He turned cranks, pushed buttons, moved rockers and turned keys, running like a crazy elf from one wall to another and from one

shelf to another. In a few minutes, as if by magic, all the games had come to life and besieged us from every hiatus, marching, jumping, whirling, croaking, ringing, and in that infernal sarabande they took possession of the house.

I covered my ears with my hands so as not to hear the deafening noise, but little by little that confusion turned into a single, powerful hum that enveloped me like a vortex.

Suddenly I panicked. The toy soldiers, the dolls, the clowns, the dancers... all the games came towards me, threateningly pushing me away. The room began to spin around me, faster and faster. I looked for support, then I saw nothing but darkness and I lost consciousness.

When I woke up I was drenched in sweat, but comfortably seated in a large rocking chair, while a tinkling music box spread its delicate notes in the room. The old man stood in front of me, handing me a cup of I don't know what steaming liquid.

"Imagination has played a trick on you," he said, smiling, "and you have succumbed to a kind of autosuggestion. Now drink this herbal tea, you will recover immediately."

Still distraught from fainting, I did not have the strength to answer. I took the cup and sipped slowly, warily, while the old man looked at me with a satisfied air. He waited for me to finish drinking, then resumed speaking.

"Well, what happened to you today should have made you understand many things," he said with a fatherly air, pinching his pointed beard.

"What am I supposed to understand?" I asked, a little annoyed. "You yourself said that it was just suggestion. At one point I believed that those games were alive and were threatening me. So I got scared."

"Certainly," replied the old man, "but you should have known long ago that things are never what they seem at first glance. Remember the

sleight of hand? Everything is illusion, and at the same time everything is possible. It depends on the state of mind."

"I remember well," I said, "but it doesn't seem to me to be the same thing. How could inanimate objects threaten me?"

"At that moment they were alive, and it was you who gave them a soul, because by dreaming you created their world. A fantastic world, of course, but not unreal. Then you let yourself be seduced. You believed it was an innocent game and you entered that world without knowing its laws, or without establishing them. That is why its inhabitants have rejected you as an intruder. Or rather, it was the inhabitants of your mind who rebelled because you did not know how to direct them."

"What does my mind have to do with those puppets? Are they or are they not games? Or is there some devilry underneath?"

"No devilry," replied the old man with an amiable smile. "Simply put, games are images, vehicles of emotions and moods that the mind collects and processes. At certain moments these images transport you to dream places, where you can do things that are impossible in reality, retaining the ability to rejoice or suffer, as well as the freedom to escape, as you have done today. But there are other games that don't give you that freedom. Since you build their world, you have to go through all its paths, paying close attention to how you move, because you would run the risk of never getting out of it again."

At that moment the old man's face grew more serious. His eyes sparkled like steel blades between his ruffled eyebrows, and I knew he wasn't joking at all. We were silent for a few moments, which seemed like an eternity to me. Then my curiosity took over.

"And... what would these games be?" I asked

timidly.

"Well, this one, for example," and so saying he pulled a tiny saddlebag out of his vest. He untied the laces that closed it and turned it over, causing a shower of colored carts as big as stamps to fall on the table. Without saying anything I began to look at them one by one while the junk dealer, breathing a long sigh, seemed to daydream.

I was struck by the variety and beauty of those figurines, and in one fell swoop I forgot the misadventure I had just passed. The characters resembled many goblins intent on carrying out the most diverse occupations. Who sawed wood, who beat iron, who stole, who mounted the guard... It seemed to me that in those papers the society of men was depicted, in a small way, with its strengths and weaknesses. But I couldn't understand how it could be played. So, to understand more, I turned to the old man:

"They are beautiful! But what is it about? I have never seen papers like these."

"Of course! These are the only existing specimens! They are called the Tarot of the Gnomes and were given to me when I was a child. By a gnome, in fact. Since then I have never shown them to anyone. If you get to know them, you will be able to gain a lot of useful knowledge from them. They will teach you to see into people's souls and to travel with your mind to universes where fantasy is reality, and dreams govern the natural order of things."

For a few seconds I was speechless. I was now used to the old man's extravagances, but this one really surpassed them all.

"First he stuns me with that infernal noise," I thought, "then he gives me a strange talk about illusions, and now he even wants me to believe that he has met a gnome. He's certainly making fun of me. But I want to play his game."

"Ah, yes! I exclaimed in a clearly mocking tone. I once met a gnome too! He was small like that and...".

"I knew you wouldn't believe me," interrupted the junk dealer. "In fact, I would have been surprised otherwise. Yet I assure you that I am not raving, and if you have the patience to listen to me I will tell you in detail the story of these strange papers. I guess when I'm done you'll think I'm crazy, but it doesn't matter. You will change your mind over time."

I was perplexed, the old man never dragged out his jokes. In addition, his voice had a too convincing tone. But at any moment I expected that sly grin that, every time, followed a successful prank.

"All right!" I replied, smiling, trying to be patient. "Tell me about these tarot cards."

The junk dealer paused, as if to rearrange his ideas. He stroked his goatee and frowned, then began:

"This story begins many years ago, when I was a child and lived in a small village in the mountains. I still remember the long night vigils, in the stable of this or that farmer, while they were all intent, adults and children, on shelling the cobs and preparing the straw that the old women wove to make baskets. I also remember certain fables of spirits, demons and other supernatural beings. During the story everyone was amazed, but I didn't understand why the adults listened to these stories with such interest and then mocked the children saying, 'They still have the wonders in their heads!'

"The fact is that often, in dreams, I relived the adventures I had heard about. So, accompanied by

the hand of fantastic creatures, I entered an enchanted world of which I still feel an immense nostalgia today.

"One winter night, while a blizzard was raging outside, a strange thing happened, indeed impossible, although I have proof that it really happened. I remember that I heard a vague ticking sound in the windows of the bedroom where I slept. At first I thought it was the branch of a tree, but then I thought I heard a cry, and two more decisive blows.

"Slowly I slipped out of the sheets and with fear I approached the window. I heard a knock again and a small voice asking for help. After some hesitation I turned the handle and in a flash a little man numb from the cold jumped in, chattering his teeth like a machine and muttering: 'Brrr... brrr... gosh! Brrr.. how cold!'

"He was as tall as the palm of his hand and wore a curious pointed hat embroidered with stars on his head. His clothes were frozen, so I took the pillowcase off the pillow and handed it to him, inviting him to take off his clothes and warm up in front of the stove. Still grumbling, the little man began to jump on two feet, waving his arms like a madman. So I understood that it was better to leave him alone. I went into the kitchen, and quietly made him a soup of milk. When I returned to the room the little man had already made himself comfortable. He was sitting on the bed, cross-legged, and had changed clothes by unstitching the pillowcase and putting it on like pajamas. Of course, he had put his big hat back on his head. As soon as I saw him I couldn't help laughing, and he too burst into a noisy laugh holding his belly with his hands and pedaling with his legs in the air. Then, composing himself, he thanked me for saving his life. In short, we became friends.

"He said he was surprised by the storm far from his home, and that he had not found any

refuge. So, in order not to die, he had to transgress one of the laws of gnomes, which dictates that he never let himself be approached by men. He recommended that we not speak to anyone about our meeting, and to repay him he gave me the thing he cared most about, the little papers that I showed you today.

'These papers contain a number of secrets,' he said solemnly. 'They portray the story of my life and the adventures I went through before becoming Grand Wizard of the Gnome People. By playing with these figures you will be able to learn many useful things, avoiding repeating the same mistakes I made. In addition, you will be able to know the soul of people simply by looking at their faces. Or you can fly with your thoughts to worlds different from the one you live in. And these are just some of the powers you can acquire by playing with these cards'.

"I was stunned. The little man I had saved was the Gnome Wizard himself, and he offered me the secrets of his mysterious arts. Timidly I asked him how to play with these cards.

'To learn how to use it,' replied the gnome, 'you must know the story of my life. It's long, but if you want I can tell you about it. Outside there is still a storm, and before dawn it will not calm down.'

"Without hesitation I agreed. I lay down on the bed resting my chin on my hands, and while the storm continued to whistle outside, the gnome began his incredible story."

THE ADVENTURES OF SICHEN

Sichen's Youth

His name was Sichen and he came from the World of Esir, where not only the gnomes live, but also elves, fairies, undines, trolls and other strange creatures. Sichen was fatherless, and lived with his old mother Nain in the village of Màlicud. When he was young he was considered the village idiot because of his bizarre behavior. He liked to walk alone in the meadows, talk to flowers, play with insects and draw on leaves. The only friends he had were animals, and every day he brought home a few: a grasshopper, a spider, a cockroach, a snail, a dragonfly, a butterfly and who knows what else.

When she started going to school, things got worse. If a topic struck his imagination, he would stop listening to the lecture and begin to fantasize freely, penetrating distant times and places, and living heroic adventures.

He once heard about the Gnomes' Paradise, the mythical Kingdom of Ketra, where spring is eternal and all creatures live in wonderful harmony. From then on, Sichen closed in on himself. He always had his head in the clouds, lost in the dream of being able to reach that magnificent place, and at school he did nothing at all. So his mother Naìn made him stop studying, hoping that he would at least help her work in the fields. But he always managed to sneak away, and did not come back until late in the evening to eat and sleep. Every day Naìn preached to him:

"If you continue like this you will end badly... It's time for you to grow up!", and so on.

So one day Sichen, tired of the constant reproaches, decided to go in search of the Land of Ketra. He packed a knapsack with some clothes and food, scraped together some silver coins stolen

0 - SICHEN

Detachment from material concerns. Travel, vacation of body and mind. Unpredictable and strange actions. Lightheartedness, madness, escape from reality. Indecipherable messages.

from his mother, and set out on the first road he came across.

Walk and walk, a little more than a month had passed and Sichen had already run out of food and money. For some time he lived on what happened to him: roots, berries and the like. But the bad season had arrived, and it rained heavily almost every day. So he went to the city of Issod, hoping to gain a few coins to continue his journey, but everywhere they shut the door in his face.

Drenched in water, horribly dirty and exhausted by hunger, the gnome no longer knew what to do. She sat down on the steps of a door, and weeping thought of the mistake she had made in abandoning her mother. While he was there complaining, the door opened and the master of the house appeared, a lame man with a gruff look.

"Who are you boy, and why are you crying?" he asked.

"My name is Sichen and I come from Màlicud," he said, wiping his tears with his arm. I

haven't eaten for three days and no one wants to give me work or bread."

"You want to work," snorted the little man with a mocking air, "but what can you do?"

"Nothing," replied Sichen, "I have never done anything in my life."

The lame man remained thoughtful for a moment, then muttered:

"Hmm... a solution can always be found. In the meantime, come into the house and we will eat something."

Sichen did not have me repeat it twice. He leapt to his feet with the agility of a cat and followed his benefactor inside the modest house. Without many pleasantries, the lame man set the table for the newcomer. Before starting the meal, he recited a prayer to the Great Thau, the supreme god of gnomes, and invited the guest to do the same. They ate in austere silence, and when the supper was over, the little man said dryly:

"Well, now we can talk business. My name is Alépos and I am a shoemaker. I just need an apprentice. If you want, you can work for me. In exchange for a day's work, you'll get two meals and a comfortable bed... I cannot give you more."

"Alone?" Sichen exclaimed with a shocked air. "No, thanks, I'd rather look elsewhere!"

So saying he took his saddlebag and walked towards the exit, but as soon as he opened the door he changed his mind. It was dark outside, it was raining, and he didn't have a coin in his pocket, nor a place to sleep. Slowly he closed the door and retraced his steps.

"All right," he muttered disconsolately. "I agree. but only as a test".

The shoemaker said nothing. He took the lantern, and smiling to himself led Sichen into a miserable little room, bade him good-night, and said:

"Tomorrow we wake up at five."

I - ALÉPOS

Beginning of sentimental and professional ventures. Cunning, skill, diplomacy, self-discipline. Willpower. Rejection of suggestions and prejudices.

He turned off the light and left.

The first few weeks were a real torture for Sichen. Alépos was a tireless and demanding worker, and he never failed to give some heavy order:

"Do this! Run there! Bring me that!"

Sichen hated such a dirty and tiring job, but with winter just around the corner, he certainly could not hope to leave. So, he had to resign himself to staying with the shoemaker until the arrival of the good season.

As time passed, the gnome became accustomed to Alépos' fatigue and brusque manner. He understood that after all he was not as hard as he seemed, on the contrary, he was open and available for dialogue. Every evening, after dinner, they spent a few hours talking in front of the fireplace. Thus it was that, little by little, Alépos taught Sichen the mastery of ambitions and passions that cloud the mind. Under the cobbler's guidance, Sichen understood that the will must be

led by intelligence. That the intelligence must be guided by the heart, and that the heart must be guided by love, the mystery of which is kept in the casket of the soul.

Sichen once confided to him his desire to visit the country of Ketra, the kingdom of eternal happiness, and to his great surprise the cobbler said:

"I too would like to see that place. Several times, since I stopped looking for it, I have reached its borders, but then the vision dissolved."

"Do you mean that someone showed you the way to reach him but you were prevented from entering?" exclaimed Sichen in an excited voice.

"I mean," replied Alépos, "that everyone has his own road that leads to Ketra, but it is not with feet that I can reach it."

"And how then, if I may know?" replied the gnome.

"Listen to my advice. Always follow the path of the heart, and if the Great Thau wants, he will show you the way to Ketra. But now go to letto, tomorrow we have a tiring day ahead of us."

The cobbler's words deeply shook the young gnome, who for a long time thought about their meaning. But he could not understand the meaning of it or get other explanations.

Winter passed quickly, and with the arrival of the good season Sichen decided to leave in search of that happy country. When the time came to say goodbye, Alépos handed him twenty silver coins, and I embraced him warmly.

"These are for the help you have given me," he said. "Make good use of it and remember what I told you. Always follow the path of the heart."

Sichen said goodbye to his benefactor, and leaving the city of Issod, he set out for the north. A few weeks after leaving he learned that a terrible epidemic had broken out in those places that was decimating the gnomes. So he decided to retrace

II - BETÈIL

Teaching, study, knowledge. Duty, conscience, moral rigor. Priesthood, religious science, faith, platonic love. Aversion to ties.

his steps, but on the way back he began to see the first plague victims. As we went the situation appeared more and more tragic; wherever Sichen went, he encountered death and desolation. When he arrived at Issod the gnome went at once to the house of Alépos, but with great regret he found him in Ietto, in pitiful conditions.

"Master," said Sichen, "what can I do for you?"

"Nothing, unfortunately... My time has come and there is no more hope for me," replied the cobbler. "But listen carefully to what I have to tell you. If you want to save yourself from this scourge, take my body out of here and lock yourself in the house. Then put a pot of water on the fireplace, light the fire and burn everything you find: furniture, clothes, tools... All! And it makes sure that there is always steam in the air. I bless you, son, and I pray the Great Thau to have mercy on you. I hope that one day you will be able to see the country of Ketra."

So saying, Alépos died.

Sichen did as the cobbler told him, but after a few days he too fell ill. In the room enveloped in steam the gnome prayed and raved, wrapped in a large shroud. He implored the Great Thau to save him, and in return he would devote his whole life to the good of his neighbor, to chastity and prayer.

The days passed, slow and inexorable, and Sichen had lost all hope of healing. But one night, as he writhed in his damp bed in the throes of atrocious spasms, a sublime creature appeared to him in a dream.

"Wake up Sichen," whispered the vision, "I am Betèil. the High Priestess of the Fairies. The Great Thau, of which I am an ambassador. has decided to accept your prayers. Take 1 this book, it contains the magic of Atotis, the first magician! of the gnomes. They are the formulas for healing all ills that afflict your fellow human beings. Study them carefully until you learn them by heart, and remember to always thank the ! Great Thau for this gift."

The fairy gave Sichen a kiss on the forehead and vanished, enveloped in a radiant cloud that revealed an altar covered with a heavy veil behind her. The gnome woke up with a start, thinking he had been dreaming, but then he noticed that his forehead was warm and his heart was beating regularly. Finally he saw the book next to the letto and realized the reality - the fairy I had healed. His

III - GIMLAR

Intelligence, understanding, wisdom. Severity of judgment, spirit of observation. An authoritarian, but kind, person. Solver help. Fecundity, creativity, generosity.

vote had been accepted.

For a long time he remained alone to pray and study, until one day the book disappeared. Sichen understood that it must be a sign sent to him by the fairy. So he gathered up the few things he had and returned to Màlicud in search of his mother, but when he arrived at the old house he learned that Naín was dead, also stricken with the terrible disease.

He went to his grave, and weeping desperately begged forgiveness for the whole moment, a light breeze caressed Sichen's hair. It was the spirit of his mother, who in a faint voice murmured to him:

"Go your way, son, and do your duty. I will always be there to protect you."

Heartened by this fleeting apparition, Sichen set out again. By now the epidemic was gone, but it had left behind a long trail of pain. The towns and cities were teeming with sick and beggars whose suffering would have softened even the hardest

heart.

Struck by such despair, Sichen remembered the signs and incantations he had learned from the Book of Atotis and began to heal all the unfortunate people he encountered, using herbs or stones, and imposing the energy of his hands. News of the gnome's miracles spread quickly, and he soon became a famous healer.

The Princess Ur

One day I reached an imperial envoy whom I invited to go immediately to court. Princess Ur was seriously ill and in urgent need of treatment. Sichen did not hesitate and immediately left for the city of Od.

When he arrived near the Royal Palace, Sichen was dazzled by the splendor. The residence of the sovereigns was a crystal castle placed on top of a granite rock, whose very steep walls supported dozens of spires soaring in the sky like beams of light.

As soon as he arrived at the palace, Sichen was unceremoniously led into the presence of Emperor Detlev and his consort Gimlar. The

IV - DETLEV

Strength, stability, earthly power. Authority, legality, moral integrity, solid and unshakable will. Powerful, generous protector. Solving material problems.

Empress spoke first, and in a stern tone she explained her requests:

"So you are Sichen, the therapist. We have heard a lot about you and we trust in your abilities. You already know our drama. Princess Ur is afflicted by an illness that no one, so far, has been able to cure. With the arts that made you famous, you have to restore her health. But remember that if you fail you will bitterly regret having embarked on a career as a charlatan."

The Emperor, seeing Sichen's bewildered expression, tried to soften the words of the fiery sovereign:

"Don't be scared, boy. Gimlar is very worried about the fate of our daughter. She has been lying ill for too long and we fear for her life. Heal her then, or you will incur the wrath of the mother and my punishment."

"Threats don't scare me," Sichen retorted proudly. "It is in the name of the Great Thau that I heal, and he will decide the fate of the Princess. But

let's not waste any more time. Accompany me to her and leave us alone."

Some of the servants led him into the Princess's room. As soon as he saw her, Sichen felt his heart beat faster. She was the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Her delicate features and the crown of blond curls that adorned her head made her resemble a goddess in his eyes.

But the gnome immediately pushed these thoughts away from him. The girl was barely breathing, and her face was strikingly pale. That was enough for him to understand that there was no time to lose. He spread the mat at the foot of the letto, lit seven candles, knelt down and intoned an oration addressed to the Great Thau.

Then he got up, and approaching the Princess he touched her body several times with his hands. He recited I beg appropriate and blew on her forehead.

Then the Princess opened her eyes, as if she had awakened after a long sleep. Slowly she got up, sitting up on the bed, but at the sight of the stranger she asked, in a fearful voice:

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my room?"

"My name is Sichen," replied the gnome, trying to reassure her, "I have been commissioned by your august parents to heal you of the disease that afflicted you. But now you don't have to worry. It's all over."

Sichen alerted the guards, and shortly after, Gimlar and Detlev arrived, beaming with happiness.

"How can we thank you? Ask for what you want and you will be heard," said the Empress as she held her daughter close to her.

"You must not thank me," said the gnome humbly, "but the Great Thau, who has accepted your prayers."

"You are too modest," replied the emperor,

V - ENIL

Modesty, piety, patience. Relief of pain, spiritual guide, confessor. The wise man to whom one resorts: doctor, priest, lawyer, etc. Religion, family, tradition.

"but we want to be grateful to you all the same for the good you have done us. As soon as the Princess recovers we will give a great banquet in your honour."

After a week everything was ready for the celebrations. The people had also been invited to rejoice in the happy event, so the city of Od was a ferment of dances, music and banquets offered by the generous sovereigns.

At the palace, Sichen was treated as a hero. He was presented to the highest dignitaries and General Zank himself, commander of the army of gnomes, thanked Sichen for saving his future bride. At the end of the banquet, the emperor, in a solemn speech, invited Sichen to accept the title of knight, gave him the fief of Nizac, and gave him an income of six thousand gold coins a month.

The following day, Sichen was brought before the Pope of the gnomes, the High Priest Enil, for the official investiture to the rank of knight. The mystical ceremony took place in the Temple of

VI - UR

Joy, beauty, love. Noble aspirations, purity of feelings. Temptations, desires. Test, exam, attempt. An important choice. Need for a decision.

Quin, the Sun God, in the presence of the nobles and clergy. At the end of the rite, the Pope secluded himself with Sichen.

"The privilege that has been granted to you today," he said in a sententious tone, "brings with it numerous advantages, but also great duties, such as loyalty to the Emperor, the obligation to defend the weak and to enforce the laws. You have attained this high degree by an unusual path, so the Great Thau has wanted to test you, for the faculties which he has given you can only be applied through love of neighbor. But remember that love brings with it the sweetest joys and the greatest tragedies. Be careful, in the future, about the use you will make of your charisma."

Having said this, Enil dismissed Sichen and retired, accompanied by a procession of priests, leaving Sichen alone to ponder the meaning of those words.

In the following months Sichen took possession of the fief given to him by the emperor.

VII - ZANK

Success, success thanks to one's own skills. Problems solved drastically. Honors, recognized merits. Growth, spiritual or material evolution. Exaggerated reactions. Dangers related to one's conduct.

The people of Nizac welcomed the new Lord with joy, knowing that he had saved the life of the Truck Princess. Everyone turned to him, as to an enlightened Prince, whenever there was a dispute to be settled, a problem to be solved or an illness to be healed.

Sichen never forgot to thank the Great Thau for having benefited him, but meeting the emperor's daughter had awakened an unknown anxiety in his soul, a desire with unclear contours that each time took on the appearance of Princess Ur.

During a reception at Od Castle, Sichen had the opportunity to talk to her and appreciate her awake and ready for jokes. For the second time since he had met her, he felt his heart beat faster and his mind blurred in front of so much beauty.

Later the Lord of Nizac, as Sichen was called, began to frequent the imperial court more and more often and especially Princess Ur, with whom he had entered into friendly confidence. They

gladly took long walks in the Garden of Tefer, telling each other their most secret ambitions. So Sichen learned that despite his playful nature, Ur was not happy. Above all, she could not resign herself to the idea of having to marry General Zank, to whom she had been betrothed after he had saved the empire of the Gnomes by defeating the barbaric

trolls.

Sichen, on the other hand, told Ur about his dream of reaching the mythical Kingdom of Ketra, where there are no nobles and commoners, where spring is eternal, there are no diseases or sadness, the sky is always blue and the meadows are perpetually in bloom. Over time, a delicate feeling blossomed between the two young gnomes. Both aspired to reach the happy village of Ketra together, fleeing the sadness of life and the duties that do not come from the heart.

One morning, as Sichen and Ur were walking among the magnolias of the Garden of Tefer, they decided to exchange a token of affection. They chose two large flowers still full of dew and crossing their wrists they drank those drops reciting together:

"Now and forever our souls are united."

In that instant the scent of magnolias clouded their thoughts and a joy never experienced dragged

them into the vortex of love. As if invested by a magnetic force, they felt irresistibly attracted, and without any fear they exchanged tender kisses and timid caresses. But a servant, who happened to see the scene, ran to warn Zanfe.

On hearing the misdeed, the general flew into a rage.

He took his sword, jumped on the cart and whipped the rabbits until they bled to punish the infamous seducer. When he reached the Garden, he jumped off the still running chariot and with his sword drawn he threw himself towards Sichen shouting like an obsessed:

"I'm going to kill you, you damn sorcerer! You will return to the hell that gave birth to you!"

He started to hit him, but Ur, to protect his friend, placed himself between the two, and the blade destined for Sichen sank into the Princess's chest.

A tremendous silence fell over the Garden. Sichen and Zanfe remained as if petrified in front of the inert body of the young girl. Shortly after, some guards arrived called by a gardener and the two contenders were tied up and brought before Gimlar and Detlev. The sovereigns were overwhelmed with grief. The empress, enraged, would have killed them with her own hands, but Detlev rose to his feet, and in a grave voice communicated to the

VIII - HELGA

Immanent justice, the consequences of every action. Law, balance, harmony. Fatality, submission to logic. Coherence. Respect for the natural order and hierarchy.

bystanders:

"We will not be the ones to judge such a serious fault. It will be Helga, the Priestess of Justice, who will decide the fairest punishment... Guards! Bring them to trial!"

Sichen and Zanfe were dragged in chains to the Temple of Din, where Helga, the blind guardian of the primitive laws, decided on cases of exceptional gravity. The trial was short. The two defendants and the servant testified their version of the facts. Then Helga lifted the scales and prayed to the Great Thau to send a sign.

Suddenly the hall fell into darkness and the priestess was enveloped in a supernatural glow. A thunderous roar seemed to rise from the bowels of the earth, shaking the walls of the Temple, while those who witnessed the trial gasped with fright. Slowly the roar stopped, as if reabsorbed from the subsoil, leaving those present in a state of deep disquiet.

A tremendous silence hovered in the Temple

when the scales began to vibrate with a vigorous tinkling. Suddenly the sword that Helga was raising in the air broke. Then the priestess took off her blindfold, and two rays of light came out of the empty eye sockets. A purple one hit Zank, and a green one Sichen.

"The verdict is pronounced," he exclaimed. "That Zank is sentenced to death for killing Princess Ur... Let Sichen be sent into perpetual exile for betraying the trust of the sovereigns. This is what the Great Thau wants."

The sentence was applied instantly, and while Zank was being led to the place of execution, Sichen was stripped of his princely clothes, branded with the mark of traitors, and, led outside the city walls, left to the shame of the people.

Needless to say, he was treated by the former subjects who had anxiously awaited the sentence: those who offended, those who kicked Me, those who spit, those who sent curses to them. With

difficulty, Sichen managed to escape from the angry crowd and get away from the city. He sought refuge in the forest, but not even the robbers who lived there could bear the presence of so despicable a gnome.

From that day on, a long, sad pilgrimage began for the gnome from one corner of the World of Esir to the other. He did the most miserable work and subjected himself to all humiliations, but no grief was so great for him as the loss of his beloved Ur. He also tried to apply the formulas of the Book of Atotis to the unfortunates he met, but after some failures he decided to stop. All he had left of the past were the dried crumbs of a magnolia flower that he kept in a bag hanging around his neck.

The Wizard of Chesd

For years Sichen wandered aimlessly, until one day he came to the region of Chesd, a rugged and mountainous territory inhabited by a few tribes of gnomes brutalized by privations. He had scarcely decided to avoid the wilderness when a battered gnome appeared on one side of the path and asked for charity.

Hardened by misery and trouble, Sichen tried to drive him away, but in that instant he remembered Alépos, the cobbler who had helped him so long ago. After some hesitation he opened his backpack and offered food to the beggar. Without breathing, the poor man ate everything that was offered to him. When he had finished, Sichen said to him:

"Keep these silver coins, it's all the money I have, and—"

The old man would not let him finish his sentence. With a quick gesture he took the coins and threw them into the ditch.

"What are you doing, you old fool?!" shouted

IX - THECLA

Experience, wisdom, philosophy, acquired knowledge. Silence, prudence. Austerity, chastity, celibacy, asceticism. Detachment from material desires. Meditation. A person able to offer valuable advice: doctor, healer, priest, sage.

Sichen. "Are you throwing away your bread for tomorrow?!"

"You know better than I do, my young friend, that real food is not bread and real wealth is not money."

For a moment Sichen thought that the poor man had gone mad for eating too quickly, but a look from the old man was enough to convince him that he was wrong. "Follow me without question," replied the beggar in an imperious voice, "and I will show you treasures that you cannot even imagine."

Sichen said nothing. He gathered his few things and set off with the old man. They walked all night along a steep and bumpy path, guided by the dim light of a lantern, till they came to the top of a mountain, in the middle of a large clearing, where stood a horrible hovel. The old man entered first, and unceremoniously said:

"That straw sack is my letto. Lie down and sleep. I will stay outside to meditate on our

meeting."

Too tired to ask questions, Sichen threw himself on the miserable bed and fell asleep immediately. The next morning, when he awoke, he saw the old man sitting in front of a wooden wheel, a mobile structure decorated with strange symbols and surmounted by a curious fetish. Sichen did not disturb the old man's prayer, but when he got up he could not help asking him who he was and what he was doing in such a wild place.

"I am Thecla, a poor hermit. And you are Sichen, the unfortunate Lord of Nizac."

"How can you know things that I myself have forgotten?" asked Sichen in amazement.

"A few days ago," replied the hermit, "while I was meditating in Jaudim's Circle, the wheel began to turn, and I saw you walking in the direction of Chesd. That's how I knew we were going to meet."

"You mean that in that thing you can see what's going on far from here?"

"Not only that," said the old man. In that thing, as you call it, I can see the fate of the living as well as that of the dead. I can know who has ascended to a higher world in angelic robes, and who has returned to earth to make amends for their mistakes."

Sichen withdrew with a nervous gesture, insulting the old man:

"Damn necromancer. The Great Thau should punish you for your idolatry!"

"You are mistaken," objected the hermit without being moved. "It is the Great Thau who has allowed me to read the destiny of men by giving me the Secret of Jaudim, just as he gave you the Book of Atotis, which you foolishly wasted by breaking the vow of chastity. Now, the Great Thau has given you a second chance. If you want to be my student, you will first have to strip yourself of your past, your name, your memories, your ambitions, and dedicate yourself body and soul to the search for a

X - JAUDIM'S WHEEL

Measurable time (month, year, seasons, lunar cycles). Fate, chance, alternating fortune. Laws of karma. Change of situation, instability, temporary benefits. Advantages that arise by chance. Good opportunities seized at the right moment.

new purity. You will have to make immense sacrifices and overcome extremely dangerous trials. Then I will be able to reveal secrets far greater than the Magic of Atotis. But be careful not to make another mistake! You could be damned for eternity."

Sichen did not answer. In that instant he felt the weight of the loneliness he had endured until then: the stones, the pain, the regrets. He thought back to Princess Ur and the happy times he had spent next to her. and a tear ran down his cheek. Then his gaze met Tecla's. Severe but good eyes, and a friendly smile, the first in a long time. The gnome had no doubts.

"I have decided. You will be my master!" he said, embracing the old man.

Then he slipped the saddlebag containing the remains of the magnolia flower from his neck and handed it to him.

In the following years, Thecla donated her immense knowledge to Sichen. He taught him to

meditate and to be absent from the body. He revealed to him the names of the stars and their power over the world. He educated him in the art of wrestling. He taught him to build talismans, to control the elements and spirits that live in water, air, fire, vegetables and minerals. But above all, she revealed to him the secrets of Jaudim's Altare: the Sacred Magic that allows you to cross the threshold of time and penetrate the universal movement of life.

At the end of his apprenticeship, Thecla called Sichen to the front of the wheel and announced to him:

"The time for teaching is over. Now it's time to show off your skills. Take that saddlebag and the wineskin next to it. They contain food and water. You will need them on the drive to the Pequad crater. There lives a monster called Kaitavranos. You have to face it and bring me the proof of your victory."

"What! Without weapons?" cried Sichen in alarm.

"You will be armed with the teachings of all these years," replied the soothsayer.

Sichen had long since learned never to contradict his master. He took his saddlebag, said goodbye to Thecla and left, mulling over the test that awaited him.

After six days of walking he finally arrived in the crater of Pequad. It was a terrible place, covered with a thick blanket of black ash from which long sharp and sharp stones emerged. A stubborn wind swept the ground, raising clouds of black dust that enveloped everything and gave it a macabre appearance, as if they were funeral draperies. It was already getting dark, so Sichen looked for a sheltered place to spend the night. He saw a cave and entered it. He ate something, spread out the blanket and fell asleep without effort. In a dream, Thecla appeared, dressed in green, reminding him

XI - THE MONSTER KAITAVRANÒS

Strength, energy, courage. Intelligence that triumphs over brute force, mastery of oneself and one's actions. Activity, work. Fortitude. Moral strength, defense of just causes, defeat of evil.

of some teachings, while the beat of a distant drum punctuated his words.

"Remember!" said the hermit. "A good ruler does not fight. A good warrior does not get angry. A good winner does not kill... Remember the secrets of water, fire, the earth, and the air... Remember...".

Meanwhile the roll of the drum had grown closer. Closer and more powerful. Sichen saw himself tied to the Wheel of Jaudim, as he spun at breakneck speed, but the dream was abruptly interrupted by a deafening roar. A powerful light illuminated the cave and a fetid smell hit Sichen's nostrils. The gnome startled. He stood up and saw a hideous monster advancing menacingly, vomiting flames with toothed jaws. Then he tried to escape from the cave, but with a leap the monster blocked his way.

Without any defense, Sichen was already feeling lost, when the words he had heard in his dream came back to him. He quickly picked up the wineskin and threw it into the jaws of Kaitavranos.

Then he sprang upon the monster and clenched his jaws with all the strength he had. Kaitavranos was squirming. He whipped the air with powerful tails and scraped the ground with his sharp hooves, but after a long scuffle he began to lose his strength, and finally collapsed to the ground.

His limbs began to flabby, until they melted like ice in the sun, leaving a thick greenish jelly on the ground that slowly evaporated into a cloud with a sulphurous smell.

The cave fell into darkness, while outside a fierce wind whipped the rocks, producing a sharp hiss. Sichen sat down, exhausted from the struggle, and in the place where Kaitavaranos had disappeared he glimpsed a faint gleam. He rose slowly, approaching cautiously, and to his great amazement he saw a gold ring in the shape of a dragon biting its tail. After some hesitation he picked it up and put it on his finger.

Suddenly the ring began to shine brighter, and a beam of light came out of the dragon's eyes and enveloped the gnome in a spiral. Sichen felt himself lifted off the ground and carried at incredible speed through a narrow tunnel. Around him he could see his memories break down into lights, scents, colors and geometric shapes that merged with each other generating emotions of fear, and immediately after happiness, and then sadness, anguish, anger, love... until everything stopped and the light went out.

When Sichen opened his eyes, he was inside the Circle of Jaudim, facing the old fortune teller.

"Welcome back! - Thecla welcomed him smiling It took you a long time!"

They embraced each other warmly, and together they entered the hut, where a frugal meal awaited them. Then Sichen told the master about the adventure in the crater and showed him the ring. The soothsayer, after listening attentively, with a nervous gesture tore Sichen's robe, stripping his

XII - THE LAMBDA HILL

Repentance, punishment, voluntary sacrifice. Detachment from the material, absolute disinterest. Inner research, idealism, utopia, art, mysticism. Liberation from prejudices, elevation, purification.

chest. The mark of the traitors was gone.

"This test," he explained in a stern voice, "served to balance the verdict pronounced by Belga in the Temple of Din. You see, Kaitavranos, the dragon of the desert, was not a real monster but a kind of dream. It was your anguish, your defects, your materialized impurities, which you had to defeat in order to continue on your path. Today you won with the energy of the mind. In the future you will have to triumph with the strength of your soul."

A few years passed from that experience and Sichen had now learned all the teachings of the hermit. He no longer had anxieties, desires and ambitions that bound Me to the material world, and thanks to the Desire of Kaitavanos his spirit could be absent from the body without danger of being lost. But above all, Sichen had learned to follow the divine light that shines in the heart. He was ready to face the Great Test so longed for and feared by aspiring magicians.

One day Thecla called Sichen in front of Jaudim's wheel. He wore the dress of sacrificial ceremonies and held in his hand the saddlebag with the magnolia flower that Princess Ur gave to Sichen in the garden of Tefer. He put it around the apprentice's neck and said to him, in a grave voice:

"The time has come for the Great Trial. Get ready to face the journey into the World of Vriafe"

Thecla had already instructed Sichen about the risks of this journey and asked him for the last time if he felt ready to face them. The gnome agreed. Then they celebrated a propitiatory rite in honor of the Great Thau. Then Sichen took the sacrificial poles on his shoulders and followed the master in silence.

Slowly they walked into the sun-scorched desert. At first they came to a place called the Meadow of Ruash, an ancient cemetery where terrible apparitions of spirits and demons were said to have occurred. They stopped, burned herbs and pronounced prayers in honor of the dead. Then they continued their march along the path that led to Colle di Lambda. On the summit there was a basin sheltered from the winds, in the center of which stood an oasis considered sacred. When they reached their destination, they fixed the sacrificial poles to the ground and mounted the scaffold. Then the soothsayer tied his apprentice's foot by passing the rope over the horizontal axis of the gallows. Then, with a great effort, Thecla began to pull the rope until Sichen was lifted off the ground and hung upside down, with no possibility of untying himself.

Sichen knew what awaited him and went along with the old man without question. When the preparations were finished, Thecla sat down under the gallows and, striking the drum, sang a mournful litany. When night came, the old man lit a fire and resumed reciting the invocations to the Great Thau in a monotonous cadence, as if he were in a state of

hypnosis, while Sichen, groaning, tried to overcome the pain.

The Great Test

For the gnome, it was a terrible ordeal. Tormented by hunger, thirst, and suffering, at the end of the second day he fell into delirium, and his mind was overwhelmed by a hurricane of thoughts. He dreamed of Princess Ur and Fairy Beteil, General Zank and Alepos, the cobbler; the Garden of Tefer, childhood dreams, blood, the trial, and the thousand adventures experienced during exile, all mixed in a gray cloud of memories.

Then, an atrocious nightmare took hold of him. He dreamed that he was dead, and while the worms devoured his limbs, the flesh detached from the bones, laying bare the skeleton. But the life inside him continued, and from the open carcass came another Sichen, or rather, his astral body: a transparent aura that swirled over that macabre puppet hanging by one foot.

Light as a feather, Sichen climbed higher and higher, past the Lambda Oasis and the Ruash Meadow. but as soon as he had crossed the edge of the hollow a gust of wind seized me, driving him towards a narrow crack in the sky beyond which stretched a narrow plain, arid and dark, dominated by a dead silence. There were no stars in the sky, and the only sources of light were small flames that shone everywhere, as far as the eye could see.

Sichen had hardly begun to venture into that desolate place when he felt himself enveloped by an icy breath. Suddenly a black silhouette appeared in front of him armed with a shiny billhook.

"Who are you?! asked the shadow. And why do you come to disturb the sleep of the dead?"

"My name is Sichen, and I am looking for the country of Ketra." The shadow let out a blood-

XIII - MICHEM

Radical transformation, sudden change. End, conclusion, fatality, necessity. Beginning of a new reality, renewal, rapid evolution. Total detachment, integral initiation, asceticism. Influence of the dead, news from the afterlife, spiritualism.

curdling laugh and murmured:

"You are crazy to seek the Kingdom of Light here. This is the Sitrara, the place where souls await their destiny to be fulfilled. The lightest ones ascend to the Sphere of Venec, where they can drink from the source of immortality. Impure souls, on the other hand, are absorbed in the vortex of life, to purge themselves of the mistakes they have committed. Look over there."

Sichen directed his gaze where he pointed to the shadow and sensed the slow, imperceptible movement of the souls towards a distant point, a kind of spiral glow where those millions of flames converged in sad procession.

"There!" the shadow resumed. "Souls that cannot rise are sucked in, compressed, and finally reduced to particles of unconscious energy, like drops of water in a stormy ocean. At the end of the journey, a warm and calm sea awaits them where they can germinate, wrap themselves in flesh, and finally return to life."

This revelation reassured Sichen, giving him hope that he could return to the world of the gnomes by the path indicated by the shadow, but in the meantime, he wanted to know more about that ghostly place.

"And who are you?!" he asked. "You don't seem to be made of the same substance as those lights!"

"I am Michahem," replied the shadow, "the Terrible Brother, the Angel of the Eternal Night. I am the one who brings the gnomes their last breath and accompanies them into this dark valley, where each one deposits his tunic of flesh and earthly

riches. The rich and the miserable, the saints and the sinners, all pass in front of me before continuing the journey along the paths of Sitrara."

At these words Sichen recalled the habit of the gnomes to bury, together with the dead, the things they held most dear in life, and he realized how pathetic that custom was. He understood the uselessness of pride, vanity and the thousand ambitions that drive gnomes to fight all their lives to distinguish themselves from each other. But Michaem's dark voice interrupted these thoughts:

"Your magic must be powerful to lead you to this place without risking your life, and I hope for

you that it will be even more powerful to get out of it."

"What does that mean?! "Sichen exclaimed. As soon as I have come, I will go!"

"Unfortunately it is not possible," replied Michaem. "You see, you are not dead, so you must continue your journey through the spheres of the cosmos, in search of the Fountain of Venec, but without a guide you will not be able to find it. Pray that someone in this place will love you, otherwise. .."

Without finishing the sentence, the blacklighter disappeared into thin air, abandoning Sichen in that desolate place. The gnome looked around. Millions of little Juci were lost as far as the eye could see in every direction, but they all converged towards the vortex indicated by Michem.

He tried to recite some magic formulas but all of them proved to be inadequate. He tried to take flight, and this attempt also failed. Not knowing how to leave, Sichen was overcome with despair. Only then did he fully understand the mistake he had made in abandoning his mother Naìn to go in search of the Paradise of the gnomes. Sichen knelt down, and beating his chest with his hands he asked the Great Thau for forgiveness for having sinned of pride and pride. The prayer was so intense that Sichen's body began to glow. Then he was enveloped in an aura of blue light and his heart became a flame. Absorbed in meditation, the gnome did not notice that he was rising above the field of souls. So, without realizing it, he left Sitrara and entered the Sphere of Venec. It was a different world from the one he had left behind. Here there were trees, flowers, animals, and the gnomes wandered happily, enveloped in a luminous aura. Sweet music reached Sichen's heart and gave him an indescribable feeling of joy, and when he opened his eyes he was dazzled by the beauty of the

place.

"This is certainly the country of Ketra," he thought as he wandered through that garden of delights in search of some familiar face.

Suddenly he saw Alépos greeting him smiling, holding his right hand on his heart. Sichen approached to embrace him, but as soon as he came into contact with the cobbler's aura he disappeared. Amazed and at the same time sorry for this strange prodigy, Sichen set off in search of some other friend. He saw a companion from his childhood, who had died while sliding on a frozen

lake, swallowed up by the winter waters. The same phenomenon happened this time too, and so with all the other people he met.

"But then it's not the country of Ketra!" Sichen reflected. "This cannot be true happiness if I cannot talk to the people I have loved. If I can't touch them and enjoy with them. Here everything seems a mirage. a fruit of the imagination".

"This is not the Kingdom of Ketra, indeed," whispered a voice behind him. Sichen turned abruptly and saw his mother Nain in front of him.

"Mother!" he shouted, moved. "My Mother! How many times have I wanted to find you. How many times have I dreamed of you rocking me, clutching my chest and caressing my hair. How

many times have I cried for the sorrow of having left you. Hug me, mom. Hold me tight!"

"Unfortunately it is not possible," replied Naìn, "not here. This is the Sphere of Venec, the world of pure intelligences, not of perfect souls. Because of their goodness they do not have to return to earth to atone for any sin. But in this limbo it is not possible to communicate with each other."

"Then how can you talk to me?" asked Sichen.

"The Great Thau granted me this privilege because I held your soul in my womb, gave you a body and grew you up with love. I alone can help you to continue on your path. Follow me, and I will show you the way. We don't have much time."

Sichen, in the grip of a strong emotion, followed his mother to the center of the garden. There was a fountain of solid light from which gushed a crystal clear water that, falling. generated celestial music, the delight of the souls who inhabited that world.

"Here," said Naìn, "this is the Fountain of Venec. The liquid you see is endowed with prodigious virtues. It is the water of Life, the essence of the energy that penetrates the Cosmos. Everyone could quench their thirst at this source if they had the necessary qualities to face the consequences of this sacrilege."

"What are the consequences, my mother?" asked Sichen curiously.

"This water has the power to fortify the spirit so that it can face a tremendous test, overcoming which one enters a world very close to the Kingdom of Ketra. I am not allowed to tell you more, but know that the risk is great, and yours must be a free and conscious choice. You can stay here, and enjoy this eternal joy, or drink the water of Venec, and if you are able to defeat the ghosts that still stir in the depths of your mind, you can hope to reach the country of Ketra, the seat of

XIV - NAÌN

Harmony, serenity, ability to adapt. Thaumaturgical virtues, healing, transfusion of life force. Union of energies. Slow and constant change. Transformation. Rest, calm, moderation

perfect love."

Sichen was a little perplexed. The idea of staying forever next to his mother filled him with happiness. Then he remembered another affection, just as powerful. He thought of Princess Ur and the moments of ecstasy he had lived with her, but his mother called him back:

"My son, time is our enemy, and I shall soon have to leave you. Decide on the path you think is right, and may the Great Thau accompany your journey."

Sichen had no more hesitation.

"Let me drink mommy. Help me to find the love I lost!"

Naìn took two jugs. he filled them at the Venec Spring and poured the liquid from one to the other, producing a silvery tinkling. Then he handed them to Sichen smiling, and as a rainbow rose from the water he drank greedily. In that instant Naìn became transparent again within the aura, and his words no longer sounded. He threw Sichen an

evanescent kiss and finally disappeared into thin air. Happy, and at the same time troubled, Sichen heard the music cross his mind and a scent of flowers pervaded his soul, inebriating him with joy. Then, abruptly, something changed.

The colors inside him became dark and an electric shock made him vibrate like a frayed rope. Fear took hold of him and the surrounding landscape took on a terrible appearance. The sky turned purple, and the surrounding land began to dry out as deep crevasses tore through it, releasing mephitic fumes. A sense of vertigo clouded Sichen's mind, and he fell into a funnel-shaped abyss. Tongues of fire broke away from the walls and sharp rocks wounded his body of light.

The fall, which seemed to have no end, ended with a violent impact on a fetid and soggy ground, impregnated with murky foams. The ground gave off sulphurous vapors that fell in the form of tiny sticky drops, giving the place the appearance of a rotting corpse, from whose belly rose a chorus of mournful voices and distant cries.

As soon as Sichen raised his head, he saw an abominable being above him, a horrendous symbiosis between a goat and a gnome, armed with a strong whip.

"Here you are, young friend!" shouted the demon. "You have finally crossed the Bridge of Daat, beyond which the knowledge of millennia shines. It is a great honor to meet you in person; I have been looking forward to hugging you!"

"Who are you?" Sichen asked, frightened. "And how do you know me?"

"I am Xémel, the Creator, and I know everything about you and the teachings that Tecla, the soothsayer, has imparted to you. I know that you possess a precious ring, won in the battle against my faithful guardian Kaitavranòs, and for this, I congratulate you. You are a good student and a conscientious apprentice. Therefore, I was

XV - XÉMEL

Fascination, suggestion, enchantment, magnetism. Temptations, sensuality, turmoil. Impulsiveness, instinct. Crime, violence, hatred, immorality, selfishness, wickedness. Malevolence. Dark science. Black magic.

burning with the desire to meet you. I want to make you aware of great secrets," Xémel whispered in Sichen's ear. "Follow me, and you will see the gifts I have in store for you."

"Wait," said Sichen with an air of concern, "what secrets, what gifts? I am looking for the Kingdom of Ketral."

"Of course, of course!" replied Xémel, smiling. "I intend to give you the keys to that kingdom. Come with me, let's go up to the Tower of Oyn; from there, you will be able to see my gift much better... immense."

In a flash, Xémel carried Sichen to the tower, and let out a guttural scream into the void. Immediately before the gnome a universe opened up, in which stars were seen to be born and died. Entire galaxies disappeared into tiny crevices, and others came out of nowhere, neatly composing thousands of spheres, bricks and crystals with polyhedral contours.

"Here!" the demon declaimed with great

XVI - THE TOWER OF OYN

Arrogance, presumption, pride, ambition, megalomania. Exile, failure, deserved punishment. Broken balance, collapse of erroneous beliefs. Loss of goods conquered by force or deception. Problems of all kinds, disorder.

emphasis. "I offer you the mysteries of the cosmos and the arts to master it; I offer you the secret of life and death, of good and evil; I offer you power over all living organisms, over visible and invisible beings. And also... look over there."

"That is the Ghinnùm," said Xémel, visibly pleased, "it is the river of lost souls. They are my food; the secret of Creation. Those too will be yours if you want. In return, I only ask you for a very small favor."

"And which one, if I may know?" asked Sichen suspiciously.

"Oh, a little thing! Xémel muttered, swaying timidly. I would like the flower that Princess Ur gave you in the Garden of Tefer. You know. I have weaknesses too..."

"But I can't give it to you," replied the gnome as they descended from the Tower, "it's a token of love. Ask me something else, but not this."

"Come on," Xémel insisted, "what is a withered flower worth after all in the face of the

riches you are about to receive? And then the Princess is dead and you will never see her again. Think rather of the females you can own... goddess-like women, skilled in the art of loving, who will introduce you to the true Paradise! Aren't you attracted to this idea? And wealth, wisdom, immortality, are they worth less than a miserable flower? Answer!"

Cornered, Sichen paused to think about what this generous devil was offering him and remembered Thecla's warnings. But as he brushed his fingers against the flower he wore hanging from his neck, he saw a flash of greed in Xémel's eyes. Then with a nervous outburst he withdrew from the demon and insulted him:

"Stay away from me, you filthy liar. Keep your riches, your knowledge, and your immortality, and let me go my way!"

"Never!" Xémel shouted furiously. "You are now in my power and nothing can save you! Never!!"

Frightened, Sichen shoved the demon into the river and tried to escape by climbing the walls of the crevasse. But Xémel clung to a rock outcrop and, getting up, began to hurl gigantic boulders at the gnome. Invaded by blind fury, the demon even knocked down the Tower of Oyn, a symbol of his perverse power, plunging his henchmen into the Ghinnùm.

Sichen was about to cross the bridge beyond which Xémel had no power, but he began to run at prodigious speed, cursing and grunting like an angry boar. In a flash he was on top of the gnome, seized him with a powerful grasp, and lifting him from the ground threw him into the abyss.

Sichen felt lost. Nothing could save him from a horrible death and atrocious condemnation: he would become a living but inert stone, adrift in the universe, for eternity. Then a long-forgotten prayer came back to him, the funeral oration from the Book of Atotis:

"Oh, angel of Thau, who guards the souls of gnomes, hear my prayer! Illuminate my fall into the realm of darkness! Support my spirit, that it may not lose faith. Help me to atone for my sins and return to the embrace of the Great Thau! And you, Great Thau!" continued Sichen, "Father of the Universe, hear my plea! Do not let my soul mingle with the forces of evil! Do not let my spirit wander restlessly among the living! Rescue my body from the clutches of demons! Welcome my soul among the ranks of the penitent..."

As Sichen sang these invocations, the fall was coming to an end. The heat of the Ghinnùm had become unbearable and the plaintive song of the damned was no longer a distant echo, but a jumble of torn voices that mingled with the gurgling of the incandescent river.

The gnome had already pronounced the amen, when a dazzling light appeared in the sky that obscured everything with its glow. The glow was so strong that he had to cover his eyes so as not to be blinded, and as the flames of the Ghinnum began to take his breath away and burn his skin, Sichen saw an angelic creature rushing upon him.

Without him even realizing what was happening, the gnome was wrapped in a large cloak and carried up, away from the river of the damned, away from that hellish place. Beneath him, Sichen saw the crucible of souls, the stony abyss, the Tower of Oyn and the demon Xémel raising his fists and spitting unrepeatable curses.

Meanwhile, the terrible Sphere of Daat had become a dark spot with livid flashes, then a distant orb, and finally a point, which disappeared into a blue ocean studded with soft-colored gems... and Sichen abandoned himself to a stillness he had never known.

The World of Vriak

When the ascension came to an end, Sichen looked around warily. It was in a dense thicket, surrounded by majestic trees whose tallest leaves reflected the silvery light of a moon-like star.

The gnome approached the unexpected rescuer to thank him, but as soon as he recognized him he was petrified with amazement.

"Ut!" she exclaimed, "My sweet love, it was you who saved me!"

So saying, he threw himself at the Princess's feet, begging her pardon for having been the cause of her tragic death.

"My soul," said the Princess, "I have already forgiven you. If you only knew how much I have suffered all these years, confined to the star Fèyar waiting to be reunited with you! Every day I

XVII - THE STARS OF FÈYAR

Faith, hope, answered prayers, inspired grace. Good omen, favorable omens, predestination. Happy conclusion, favorable results. Luminous idea, moral beauty, pure aesthetics. Innocence, candor, naivety.

experienced the pains and trials you had to face to pay for your mistakes, and my pain was even greater for the inability to help you. But I never despaired. I knew that our feeling would bring us together, and it was only when the Great Thau sent me to save you from the flames of the Ghinnùm that I feared I would lose you forever. But now you are here with me and our love has no more obstacles."

So saying, Ur raised Sichen's face with his hands, and smiling asked him:

"Have you seen this wood? Do you recognize him?"

"It's beautiful," said the gnome, "it reminds me of the places where I played as a child."

"Look closer," replied the Princess. Sichen looked around several times, then exclaimed:

"But this is the Garden of Tefer, how is it possible? Have we returned to the World of Esir?"

"No, my love," Ur explained, smiling, "here we are on Tsaddi, the moon that gravitates around

XVIII - THE MOON OF TSADDI

Sentimentality, affection. Extravagances, illusions, fantasies, hallucinations. Journeys on the water, long and difficult searches, strange encounters. Sleepwalking, attraction to the unknown, occultism. Moon phases.

the Ogma Sphere. In this world it is possible to evoke the most beautiful places and the happiest situations in which one has lived, and to relive them, so that they remain forever etched in the sky, so that the Great Thau can rejoice in the happiness of his children, and at the end of days can reunite them for eternity. But now follow me, I want to show you an enchanted place."

The princess took Sichen by the hand and led him to a grassy clearing in the middle of which two trees had grown together, united in a loving embrace.

"Here," said Ur, "what does this place remind you of?"

"But it's the place where we... where for the first time we discovered that we loved each other."

"Did you see?" the Princess resumed. "Not a single thought has changed him, not a single desire has corrupted him. And now we are here again, like that day."

Sichen and Ur looked into each other's eyes

XIX - THE LIGHT OF QUIN

Happiness, satisfaction, perfect success. Success, positive period, problem solving. Fraternity, friendship, peace. Faithful collaborators, harmony, love, sincerity of feelings.

and an inner light made them shine like diamonds. Because of the emotion, Sichen could not hold back his tears and a tear fell into the saddlebag he kept hanging from his neck. Miraculously, it began to swell and the ashes it contained turned into the white, fragrant magnolia flower that Ur had given him before he died.

"This will be our nuptial bed," said the Princess, taking her friend by the hand.

Drunk with joy, Sichen clutched the flower to his chest, and a delicate aroma emanated from the damp petals, a subtle essence that enveloped the two lovers like an impalpable cloak: the scent of love.

Once again Sichen and Ur felt irresistibly attracted, but this time no one came to disturb them. So, while the creatures of the forest sang their hymn to joy, the two gnomes loved each other dearly. Their souls began to whirl in a playful vortex, hiding, looking for each other, chasing each other. Then they merged with each other,

penetrating each other like beams of light. From this union a transparent sphere took shape which, rising together with the flower, went to join the shining disk of Ogma. The two lovers lost themselves in the bliss of that world; they became music, colors, scents, ecstatic sensations, and finally they lost consciousness of themselves and participated in the beauty of creation, in the light that illuminates it and in the energy that I pervade down to the smallest particle, in the goodness that, originally, crossed time and space.

When he woke up, struck by a ray of sunlight filtering through a rudimentary shelter, Sichen struggled to understand where he was. He looked around, but was dazzled by the reflections on the surrounding ground. Then he narrowed his eyes, and faintly perceived a white silhouette approaching, but only when he heard his voice could he recognize it.

"Welcome back, friend," said the ghost.

"Master!" Sichen exclaimed. "But how... where are they?"

"Where are we, you mean," replied Thecla, smiling. "We are in the World of Esir, specifically on the hill of Lambda, where we arrived seven days ago. Since then, we have never moved from here."

"Seven days? Have we never moved? So what about the Angel Michem, my mother, the demon Xémel, Princess Ur? I can't have dreamed of them! I met them, I talked to them, I risked my life..."

"You risked your soul," interrupted Thecla, "and not only that. If you had made any mistake... However, your journey into the World of Vriak was successful. When I freed you from the sacrificial poles, the light of Quin had already placed your astral body in the shell of flesh, and you had an expression of genuine peace on your face."

Sichen was overwhelmed for a few minutes. The memory of the meeting with his mother and above all the joy of having found his beloved Ur,

XX - RUASH'S MEADOW

Moral renewal, awakening. Resurrection, spiritual penetration, divine inspiration. Liberation, relief, healing, recovery of energy. Preaching, prophecy, fame, propaganda.

instilled in his heart a deep sense of nostalgia, the desire to savor the blue, the light, the quiet. A tear ran down his face, but Thecla's benevolent voice brought him back to reality.

"Don't cry Sichen. Think rather about the reason for your trip, and how lucky you have been. Not everyone returns unscathed from the Great Trial! And then another thing should console you."

"And what?" asked the gnome, trying to hold back his emotion.

"The examination to which you have been subjected has made you an enlightened sage. Now you can understand the true meaning of words such as wisdom, intelligence, mercy, justice, fear, beauty, splendor, glory, and love. Now you know the secret of the transmigration of souls and the regeneration of spirits in the Realm of Light. You also know that someone, in some sphere of the sky, is waiting for your return and protects you. You should rejoice in this!"

Sichen said nothing, and remained a little

longer with his gaze lost in space. Then he asked:

"Master, doesn't the country of Ketra exist then?"

Thecla, smiling, placed a hand on his shoulder. In silence they left the oasis, walking on the path back. The sun was sinking on the horizon, painting the Chesd Desert red. Purple streaks streaked the sky, while on Ruash's Meadow a light breeze moved the finest sand, which swirled between the tombs giving rise to a rustling dance of spirits and fairies.

But a stronger wind suddenly rose forcing the

two travelers to shield their eyes so as not to be blinded. At one point, in the whirlwind of dust and leaves, Sichen intrawide an angel feeding a wind instrument, a trumpet or a clarinet. A sweet melody began to hover over stones and brushwood, mingling with the rushing wind, while a chorus of angelic voices rose from distant clouds. Then the old man made his apprentice stop and said, placing his open hand close to his ear:

"Do you hear this song? They are the

XXI - THE WORLD OF ESIR

Perfection, total success, crowning of a feat. The cosmic Temple, the Universe, the inner World. Integral science, spiritual power. Sacred magic. Reward, recognition of merit.

messengers of the Great Thau, who have come down to announce to the dead that another gnome has been added to the ranks of the elect. This is a time of great joy for pious souls, and for all those who burn with the desire to reach the Kingdom of Ketra. Kneel, and thank the Supreme Goodness for the privilege He has granted you."

Sichen obeyed the master and sang a passionate praise to the beauty of creation and True Love that transforms desire into passion, heat into light and flesh into crystal.

At that instant a gash opened in the sky, and a blinding ray struck Sichen's forehead, drawing a golden crown on his hair, while a gentle voice whispered in his ear:

"My beloved husband, the words you have spoken are written in heaven. Do not cover the light that has invaded your mind and wait patiently for the call to Life."

Sichen looked up to heaven, and with a heart swollen with nostalgia he raised a hand in greeting.

Then the wind calmed down, the voices fell silent, the music ceased, and the clouds dissolved. Old Thecla helped Sichen to his feet, and without saying a word the two set out again.

While the shrill song of the crickets accompanied their steps, the Moon, full and majestic, rose behind the Colle di Lambda, mixing its warm light with the bloody reflections of the sunset.

THE TAROT OF THE GNOMES

The origin of the Glyphs

This is the story that the junk dealer told me: Sichen's adventures in the World of Esir and his journey into the dimension of Vriak, through the spheres of creation. I don't know how long I stayed listening to him, sitting in the rocking chair and surrounded by those same games, now inert, that had attacked me a little earlier.

The fact is that by the end of the story I had completely forgotten where I was. I even thought I had in front of me the same Sichen, just as I had imagined him while the old man was talking to me: a funny little man in a pointed hat adorned with stars, sitting on his tiny world populated by elves, gnomes, fairies, demons and angels. I felt confused, upset, and without thinking I asked:

"But the country of Ketra, and these papers... Yes, I mean... Does this story end here?"

"Oh, no!" replied the junk dealer, stroking his beard with two fingers. "You should know that Tecla, the soothsayer, in the months following the Great Test, assigned Sichen the task of drawing the most important moments of his life, separating the period of magical apprenticeship from the rest of his mundane life. This work was to become the Seal of Sichen, the synthesis of the Perfect Magical Work. Thus, the apprentice, meditating in the Circle of Jaudim, recalled the experiences he had lived, and one by one he drew the cards that I have given you today, the Tarot of the Gnomes. Only by reflecting clearly on the mistakes made and the trials endured could the gnome fully understand the mystery of the Kingdom of Ketra."

"But then did Sichen manage to reach that country?" I asked, naively. "And what is this mystery about?"

Smiling benevolently, the old man answered:

"What you ask for is impossible to communicate in words, since it is an experience that can only be lived with the mind. You will have understood it, I hope. Nevertheless, Sichen's adventures are the model of a journey that many have tried to repeat. But I assure you that few have done it to the end. To set out safely on that same path you need intelligence, courage, will, and above all love. You see, the twenty-two Greater Glyphs represent the stages of the path that leads to the gates of the Kingdom of Ketra, and also indicate the dangers and great trials to be faced in order to climb from one step to another. But since the roads are as numerous as the souls of the gnomes, each journey is unique and unrepeatable."

I was impressed by the mixture of simplicity and power contained in those figures but my curiosity was immediately stimulated by the other carticelles, the meaning of which was still completely obscure to me.

THE PLEASURE

Celebrations, entertainment, revelry. Period of euphoria. Collective joy.

THE HARVEST

Reaping what has been sown. Earnings, prosperous business.

"And what do these figures mean?" I asked, pointing to the remaining papers.

"The fifty-six numeral cards, or Minor Glyphs," replied the old man, "portray the experiences lived by Sichen in the period of exile, before meeting the soothsayer Thecla. As you can see, they are divided into four groups marked with different symbols: Cups, Coins, Wands and Swords.

"Each group brings together different scenes of everyday life. which, due to their characteristics, can be traced back to one of the four fundamental sectors of human activities. The Cups represent the pleasures of life, amusements and excesses in entertainment, but they also represent the religious tradition that guides the people spiritually and keeps them in simple joy. The Coins represent licit and illicit gains, winnings and fortunes acquired by chance or merit. The sticks represent work, fatigue, daily duties and family life. Finally, the Swords depict social rules, ideal tensions, and relationships among gnomes: both fair conflicts, and abuses and

CONSTANCY

Patient and constant work. Long-term projects. Elaboration of ideas.

THE TRADITION

Thanksgiving, gratitude. Offering, gift. Friendship. Familiarity.

violence.

"At the top of each group there is then the court hierarchy: the imperial cards. They represent the higher laws that regulate social life. Kings are the mind of the Nation that guides the acts of the body, the People, in a right or wrong way, in any case conforming solely to their own will, unchallenged if not by other Kings. Sometimes, however, it happens that the People rebel against injustice and dethrone a Sovereign by electing in his place a Noble with ideas more suited to the needs of the time. Other times it is the Nobles themselves, or the merchants, who instigate the people to violence to take advantage of the Kingdom of Disorder.

"Queens, on the other hand, are the spirit of the Nation: the mothers or wives of Kings. They inspire royal decisions in various ways, thus imposing an occult dominion on the People. Sometimes Queens are more loved than the King himself; at other times they are the cause of

THE EXPERIENCE

Study, application, experience. Refinement, improvement. Care, therapy.

THE WEDDING

Union, engagement, marriage, emotional bond. Family celebrations, anniversaries.

tragedies that affect the entire nation.

"The Knights are the soul of the Nation: the Nobility. They are the privileged who possess the respect of the People and the trust of the royal family, in whose name they exercise power. But this privilege is repaid by defending the humble and defenseless, enforcing the laws, and countering internal and external enemies.

"However, the Knights are not always up to their task, due to laziness, cowardice, greed or malice. Therefore it sometimes happens that the King, or the People, get rid of negligent or corrupt feudal lords. It has happened, however, that the corrupt Nobility has supported decadent Sovereigns, so that by tacit consent or by common agreement they have bled the People for a long time, living in luxury and opulence.

"Then come the Infantrymen: mediators between the Nobles and the People. They have no power, being mere executors of orders, whether just or unjust. In wars they are soldiers, in civilian

THE TRUTH

Publicity, notoriety, fame. Burning truth, embarrassing secrets.

SOCIAL LIFE

Dialogue, confrontation, social life. New acquaintances, casual relationships.

life they are guards or messengers, in court life they are apprentices and servants. Being as close to the People as to the Court, the moral solidity of a Kingdom can be guessed from their behavior. When masters are corrupt, their servants learn all the cunning and wickedness inspired by selfishness, and they carry out all the more naturally, the more shameless are the wicked deeds of their masters.

"Finally comes the People: the body of the Nation, represented in the numeral cards. The actions of the People are simple and sometimes ridiculous, and individually they are of no importance in the life of the Nation. But the People are important because they are numerous, and thanks to their slow and steady application, they give form and substance to a Kingdom.

"Of course, a nation brings together warriors, merchants, artisans and peasants, but Sichen wanted to divide the Minor Glyphs into four distinct groups to highlight the fundamental differences between the various peoples. Thus, while one

THE DRUNKENNESS

Confidences, gossip, unreliable news, information picked up casually.

THE HOLIDAY

Vacation, moment of euphoria. Travel, adventure, search for emotions.

people may have distinctly warlike aptitudes (Swords), another may be more inclined to commerce (Coins), or to agriculture and industry (Sticks), or even to religion (Cups), as well as to idleness, squandering and vice, when it loses its spiritual guidance.

"As you can see, in the fifty-six numeral cards all the moral, intellectual and material activities of the people of the gnomes are symbolically represented."

"I like them very much," I said with a smug air, "but apart from the imperial cards, I cannot see a logical order that unites the courts. They seem to be put together in bulk."

"It's true! replied the junk dealer. "Sichen himself confided to me that he had arranged them without any criterion to forget the particular events that each card represented for him.

"I don't understand," I exclaimed with an astonished air. "Why is it a game? And how is it possible to play with these stickers?"

THE FALLING IN LOVE

Infatuation, beginning of a relationship. Torment, passion, inexperience.

THE SEDUCTION

The groom, the father, the lover. Wise and thoughtful man. The mature couple, the family.

"It may seem incredible to you," he said, "yet these cards can be used for various companion games, as simple as they are fun."

The junk dealer took the bunch in his hand, and slowly stirring began to explain.

The "Once Upon a Time" Game

"This, to give an example, is called Once upon a time and can be played by two, three or even four or five players, there is no problem of number. See how it works. First of all, you decide how many cards to play with. Being fifty-six, you have to make sure that all the participants have the same amount of figures. In this case, just to give a not too difficult example, we take ten cards each. Here, ten to you... and ten to me...

Now, both you and I have to arrange the ten cards in our possession following a logical sequence. Basically, we have to invent a story based on the papers that have happened to us. There will

PREGNANCY

Loving bride. Mother, lover, mature female. Happy union. Fecundity.

THE FAMILY

The groom, the father, the lover. Wise and thoughtful man. Happy family.

certainly be some that are difficult to justify. In this case it is possible to discard it and draw another card from the deck, hoping to be able to fit it into the fairy tale we intend to tell. So let's get started... So, I have the 5 of Wands, the 7 of Coins, the Ace of Coins, the 6 of Cups, the 3 of Cups, the Jack of Coins, the 7 of Swords, the 9 of Cups, the Queen of Pentacles and the 5 of Cups"

The old man was for a while overwhelmed, pinching his beard, moving the papers, scratching his ears, and muttering. Finally he began.

"Once upon a time there was a lazy gnome named ... let's call it Snurf. He spent entire days in the tavern and it didn't cross his mind to look for a job. His only worries consisted of drinking, singing and dancing (6 of Cups). Only from time to time did he get busy with the only activities he knew well: theft and fraud. But he did not exaggerate, so that no one could call him a worker, a term that disgusted him more than any other offense. Thus, he lived hanging out from one tavern to another,

BUSINESS

Love for money. Pursuit of profits. Start of commercial activities.

THE ASSOCIATION

Trade association. Contracts. Union of energies. Agreement, collaboration.

from one tavern to another, without ever posing any problem.

One day, however, he casually overheard a conversation between two gnomes, evidently a little tipsy (9 of Cups), who were discussing an old eccentric. This guy had a passion for chemistry, and for many years he had been locked up at home doing experiments, squandering large amounts of money in the illusion of being able to make gold. The funniest thing, however, was that in recent times his governess had been telling around that the old man must have been completely mad. In fact, he had told her that he had finally managed to make that dream come true, and had even recommended that she not mention it to anyone. The housekeeper had asked him to show her the gold and when she saw it she was dazzled by the purity of that metal. He asked him if he could have an ounce, inventing sick relatives and unfortunate children. But he, very worried, replied that that was a philosophical gold, and that not everyone was

SAVING

A spirit of economy, savings, pensions. Slow and cautious actions.

VANITY

Frivolity, excessive consideration of oneself. Error, blunder.

able to understand its value.

The two drank and laughed out loud thinking of the old chemist's madness. But Snurf, who was convinced that he knew people better than anyone else, thought to himself that even madmen are sometimes capable of brilliant inventions. So he went to the alchemist's house, and pretending to be a chemistry student, he tried to get hired as a shop boy. But the old man did not believe the words of the young gnome and he chased away in a bad way (5 of Wands). Then Snurf realized that he was on the right track and began to spy on the chemist by hiding in the hedge in front of the window of the laboratory.

The weeks passed quickly and he continued to observe and take notes. Then the months passed, and the gnome began to be tired of this useless waiting, but one night of the new moon he sensed that something unusual was about to happen. The old man was visibly excited, and in the evening vespers prayers he had put a more intense charge.

THE FAILURE

Unfavorable moment. Bad luck in business. Money losses. Tax problems.

THE TREASURE

Illusions of easy earnings. Vain hopes. Unrealistic projects. Dreams.

But that's not all. In preparing the retorts, stills, and other tools, the alchemist had blessed the tools by spraying them as usual with dew water, but uttering formulas that Snurf had not yet heard.

Then the old man lit the stove, and after extracting an airtight jar from the atanòr, he put its contents into distillation. A few hours later, a subtle hiss was heard, then the sound of a drop falling into a cup, where the chemist had placed a copper coin. Then another was heard, and shortly after another. Slowly, tiny shiny drops began to come out of the still, which as they fell produced a luminous effervescence. The phenomenon soon ceased and Snurf saw the satisfied old man (5 of Cups) as he pulled a coin as bright as gold from the cup. He placed it on his heart, and knelt down to say a prayer of thanksgiving to the Great Thau.

Behind the window, in the middle of the hedge, Snurf was not in the skin with happiness, but tried to restrain himself so as not to be discovered. He waited in this awkward position until the old

DISTRUST

Doubts, suspicions, excessive concerns. Trusting instinct, prudence.

MISERY

Ineptitude, inability to act. Serious impediment, illness, constraint.

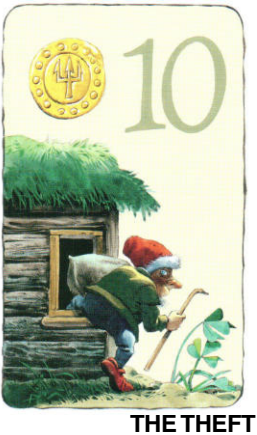
man lay down, and when he was sure he had fallen asleep he slipped away stealthily. He immediately ran home, determined to take advantage of that magical night.

Based on the notes accumulated in the previous days, Snurf had repeated all the phases of this experiment and now he was about to repeat the ending. Carefully, minutely, the gnome weighed the quantities, calculated the doses and repeated the formulas. At the crucial moment, with great amazement Snurf saw the transformation of a copper coin into a gold coin (Jack of Coins) take place before his eyes. He stayed all night handling this jewel, checking weight and proportion over and over again to be sure of the result. It was really gold. Pure gold!

Snurf spent the next few days in a kind of feverish delirium. He still couldn't understand reality. He lived in the grip of continuous visions of crystals that, rising from the depths of his mind, came to consciousness, projecting themselves into

AVARICE

Avarice, excessive attachment to money. Accumulation of wealth. Freezing of assets.



THE THEFT

Embezzlement, illegal gains, corruption, dishonesty.

everyday reality. Of all things present, whether inert or living, Snurf saw life unfold clearly. Of the plants he saw the absorption of minerals at the roots, perceived the growth and the variation of the color of the stem. He distinguished the process of photosynthesis in the leaves, and by concentrating he could see everything distinguished according to its molecular, organic or crystalline structure."

The old junk dealer paused for a short time, then went on:

"Finally this period passed and Snurf felt as if he had been freed from a burden. It didn't take long for him to decide to take full advantage of this invention. With the gold coin he went to the Royal Palace, and after a tedious antechamber that lasted several weeks, he managed to be received by the Queen.

When the sovereign saw the coin produced by Snurf (Queen of Coins) she did not bat an eyelid. Quite simply she asked him if he would be able to produce more, and since the gnome agreed, she

THE LOAN

Rescue, loan, help. Beginning of economic activities. Far-away earnings.

THE TAX AUTHORITIES

Taxes, social security contributions. Fine, expected expenses, interest expenses. Economic problems.

decided to give him this possibility. As a reward he would become Court Treasurer, but if he failed he would have to repent bitterly. He had a large laboratory set up, with new and expensive equipment, inside a tower isolated from the rest of the Palace.

Snurf set to work like a good Hyena, for the first time in his life. He personally prepared the liquid for the experiment (3 of Cups), then began to implement the first three phases already tested: Calcination, Sublimation and Solution... he sealed everything in the hermetic vessel and I placed it in the atanòr for the next, extremely delicate phase: Putrefaction. At this point he was able to rest a little, waiting for the new moon.

When the fateful night came, Snurf felt the same vibration he felt when the miracle was about to take place in the old alchemist's laboratory. He prepared a cup full of copper coins, opened the airtight vessel and began the work of Distillation. After a few hours he heard the hiss that announced

PENSION

Business intuition. Income from real estate, from eco shares. Fruitful use of all means.

SUCCESS

Exploits completed with success. Benefits derived from influential friendships.

the beginning of the Coagulation, and with great joy he saw the drops of that portentous elixir falling into the cup, slowly dyeing the copper until it turned into gold.

With feverish anxiety he took out the coins, placing them in a casket and adding others to the cup. Overnight, Snurf had managed to turn ten pounds of copper coins into the same amount of gold.

As before, he waited a few days before resuming contact with his fellow humans. When he felt himself completely recovered, he sent for the Queen, and in a triumphant manner invited her to judge the work done. The Sovereign let slip a slight expression of wonder that she promptly hid by moving her gaze elsewhere. He called the servants and had the gold brought to his apartments and took his leave waiting to issue the Royal Judgment. Eager to verify that prodigy, the Queen hastened to deal with diplomatic affairs, the pragmatic receptions, the complaints of the Knights, the dispositions to servants. Then he went in a hurry to his room and after changing his clothes he proceeded to taste the gold (7 of Pentacles).

To his great surprise, however, these coins were not of pure gold, like the first one that the gnome had shown, but seemed to be of an unknown alloy, similar in all respects to gold, but with the weight and malleability of copper. Seized by a fit of fury, the Queen called the guards and had the gnome imprisoned, condemning him to forced labor in the royal foundries (7 of Swords).

In her immense generosity, however, the sovereign wanted to leave the gnome a positive memory of this experience, and allowed him to keep the gold coin he had produced to carry out his fraud (Ace of Coins). In the long days spent forging iron, Snurf tried to remember when and how he could have made a mistake, until one day, by some strange magic, a phrase appeared on the coin: I

GLITTER FOR THE WISE, BUT I DAZZLE THE FOOL. Only then could the gnome understand the meaning of his mistake.

Well, these were my ten cards. Now let's see yours."

"Well, I don't think I'm capable of inventing such a good story, but I'll try anyway."

After thinking of a possible story, I laid my cards on the table, chanting their names aloud, slowly:

"2 of Swords, King of Swords, 9 of Wands, 4 of Coins, 8 of Cups, 6 of Swords. 2 of Coins, Jack of Cups, 6 of Pentacles and 4 of Cups. With these figures I think I can build a fairy tale, but there is a card that I cannot justify, 2 of Coins. I can replace her, can't I?"

I put the paper on the table, and the junk dealer nodded his head.

From the deck I drew the Knight of Cups. I paused for a while to think and began:

"Once upon a time there was a De... No, I

THE WORK

Work. Energy applied in an intelligent and rational way. Willpower.

THE FERVOR

Intense and diligent activity. Creative fervor. Family industriousness. Harmony.

didn't want to start like this. Then. Once upon a time there was a village... No, I don't like it that either. In short, there was a kingdom where everyone lived happily. The people worked quietly, the King ruled wisely (King of Swords) and the nobles administered their fiefs honestly. Everything went on happily, until one day a magpie arrived in the palace. She flew briskly into the treasure room and left with a coin. The treasurer was not surprised by this fact because magpies, when they are in love, have the habit of bringing glittering objects (4 of Pentacles) as a gift to their companion. But the magpie returned a short time later, taking away another coin, and then again, and another, till it came to take more than one little present every day.

When the treasurer told the King of this strange phenomenon, the magpie had already taken away almost a chest of coins. The King was furious for not having been warned sooner. He had the negligent treasurer beaten and I fired (9 of

THE BREATHLESSNESS

Fatigue, breathlessness, dispersion of energy. Work that does not bring any improvement.

THE PREPARATION

Preparation, set-up, organization. Care, home economics.

Wands). Then he assessed the situation and decided. He had all the doors and windows that gave access to the treasure room replaced, and he had every hole through which the bird could enter.

But even this remedy proved useless because from the towers of the palace, every evening towards sunset, the guards saw the magpie with a coin locked in its beak moving away. Nor did it help to close all the chests with strong padlocks, and to place numerous guards in the treasure room. Even so, every evening the magpie left with a coin.

Then the King decided to have a trusty knight follow the bird, but after a few days he had not yet returned, while the magpie continued with its robberies. Then he sent another knight, and then another, but no one ever returned from his mission, till one day a battered and battered knight came to court, who reported what he had seen by following the magpie to the mountains of the north. The bird, in reality, was a powerful sorcerer who, thanks to his magical arts, could transform himself at will (4

THE GROWTH

Development, maturation. Attention, care, care. Passing problems.

GOOD FORTUNE

Unexpected gains, alternating luck. Divination, positive warning signs.

of Cups).

The knight had personally seen him turn into a magpie, but when he tried to confront the sorcerer he turned into a terrible dragon, and only by a miracle did the knight manage to escape him.

Hearing this story, the King summoned the knights to a meeting and explained the dramatic circumstances to them. The magician had already seized a great deal of wealth, and if he continued at this rate he would soon put the country on the brink of ruin. It was therefore necessary to prevent him from continuing his robberies. The knights organized themselves and followed the magpie to the sorcerer's lair but, as soon as they arrived, they were attacked by a frightening dragon that killed many valiant warriors and made even the most daring flee (6 of Swords).

On their return the King was seized by despair. He didn't know what to do anymore, so he decided to publish a notice. Whoever was able to defeat the dragon would receive a fief and an

THE DISAGREEMENT

Family conflicts, controversies. Small differences of opinion, disagreements.

THE INCIDENT

Unpleasant mishap, period of illness. Misfortune. Unexpected problems.

income of a thousand coins of gold per month as a reward. He entrusted the royal messenger with the task of going through the districts to spread the news, but after a few months no one had yet shown up.

The sovereign now despaired of being able to defeat the magician, when a drunkard arrived at court who claimed to know an infallible system, capable of defeating an entire army, let alone any monster (Jack of Cups). Dismayed by the drunkard's statements, the King went to expel him, but the latter insisted with absolute conviction.

"He must be completely out of his mind," thought the King, but as he was the only one who showed up, he decided to give him a chance. He asked him how he intended to behave, but the drunken man replied that it was a secret, and simply asked to have a steed, a weapon, and some gold sicio at his disposal. The King agreed, threatening him that if he made fun of him he would regret it all his life, but the drunk did not

THE PUNISHMENT

Reproach. Public shame. Misdeeds discovered. Punishment.

THE QUARREL

Quarrel, conflict of personality or interest. Harsh confrontation. Physical confrontation.

seem to be very worried, and took his leave saying that he would return with the dragon's head in the bag.

Before leaving, the reckless drunkard went around all the taverns, tasting dozens of different wines (8 of Cups). Finally he found one that seemed to be right for him, a particularly honeyed and alcoholic fragolino. He bought five wineskins, took them home and mixed them with a large quantity of sleeping pills. Then he got ready, shaving thoroughly and dressing like a royal messenger. He loaded his steed and at sunset, as the magpie left the castle, he followed it to the sorcerer's house. When he got there he found the dragon waiting for him, threatening to tear him to pieces, but the drunken man said that he came in peace, and brought a friendly message and a lovely gift from the King. So saying he offered him a cup of liquor, but the dragon-sorcerer, distrusting him, ordered him to drink first.

The drunkard gladly consented, and began to

THE ADDICTION

Start of work activities.
Skill-dependent success.
Luck alternates.

THE SUCCESS

Seeking powerful help.
Possibility of achieving
career advancement.

drink garganelle, but he had drunk an antidote before, and so the sleeping pill had no effect on him. The sorcerer, seeing such a hearty drink, and smelling the exquisite scent of the strawberry, could not restrain himself and began to drink out loud. In a short time the two were so drunk that they could not stand, while the dragon, feeling the effects of the sleeping pill, began to fall asleep (6 of Pentacles).

Then the drunkard, staggering, drew his sword from its sheath and thrust it into the heart of the dragon, which he collapsed to the ground with a hallucinatory cry (2 of Swords). Then he loaded the gold on his steed, cut off the dragon's head, and returned to the court to receive his reward, which the King was only too happy to bestow on so simple and brave a man."

The junk dealer clapped his hands, satisfied with my interpretation:

"Well done," he said, "I see that you have learned quickly. On the other hand, all you need is

THE INSPIRATION

Education, intellectual activity. Good results thanks to influential friends or relatives.

THE POWER

Affirmation, public recognition. Power, authority, decision-making capacity.

a little imagination. This same game can also be played according to a nice variant.

The Domino Game

That's how it works. The usual ten cards are dealt to each player, and one is placed face up on the table. Then the participants in the game draw a card from the deck. Whoever gets the highest score begins. In practice, following the same criterion as in the previous game, you have to try to "attach" the cards you have in your hand to those on the table. Thus, the person who starts the game must introduce the story by explaining the meaning of the opening card and that of the card he intends to "attack". Each turn you can connect one card at a time, and if you do not have a suitable card, the hand passes to the next player.

The game must be conducted fairly quickly and we cannot dwell on too many explanations. Of course. The judgment on the consistency of the "attached" card is up to the other players. The winner is the one who runs out of cards first and manages to summarize the entire story elaborated during the game."

"This game is fun too," I said. "Do we want to try it?"

"I really don't feel like racking my brains," replied the junk dealer. "Rather, if you're interested, I'd like to teach you a completely different game.

Game of the Sixteenth Century

"It is called Cinquecento, and can be played by two, three or even four players. It consists of building numerical combinations that must be placed on the table at each turn, until someone runs out of cards. In this case it is said that he 'closed his hand'.

"Then the points scored by each player are counted. subtracting the value of the cards left in the hand from the value of the combinations placed on the table. The points scored on each hand must be marked on a piece of paper, because the end of the game consists in reaching the goal of 500 points, which represents victory.

"The possible combinations are called Straights, i.e. cards of the same 'suit' (Wands, Cups, Pentacles or Swords), gathered in groups of at least three cards and arranged in ascending order. Then there are the Three of a Kind, that is, three cards of the same rank (all two, three or four etc., up to Jack, Knight. Queen and King). These combinations are composed during the game and immediately placed on the table because the cards that remain in the hand pay a pledge.

"Obviously you have to be careful not to mix your cards with those of the opposing players, since in the end everyone has to count the points scored."

THE FORCE

Willpower, energy in leading businesses. Possibility of conflict.

WICKEDNESS

Illegal actions, abuse of one's own means. Dishonesty destined to be punished.

"He has already said that," I exclaimed, "but how do you play?"

"Don't be impatient," replied the junk dealer, "if you give me time I'll explain everything. So, the game goes like this. Ten cards are dealt each and the rest are left face down. First players check if they have Straights or Three of a Kind. Then, when everyone has put their papers in order, the real game begins.

"In turn, each person draws a card from the deck and checks if they need it to complete the Straights or Three of a Kind they are building in their hand. Each time he completes a meld, he puts it on the table, then throws a card he doesn't need. The player who takes the next turn can choose to draw from the deck, or he can take the discard, if it is used to make a combination. In this case, however, he must put on the table the Straight or the Tris composed with the collected waste.

"The game continues in this way, making sure that the discarded cards remain clearly visible. And

CHARITY

Generosity, charity, love for one's neighbor. Selfless help. Gift.

FAIRNESS

Fairness, sense of proportion. Discussion, constructive criticism. Resolved issues.

this is because, on his turn, each player can decide to take any card previously discarded, instead of drawing from the deck. To do this, however, you must also take all the cards that are between the chosen card and the last discard.

"For example: there are six discards on the table and the player needs the card thrown away in the second round. Then he will take that card and the next four, with the obligation, however, to put on the table the Straight or Three of a Kind composed with that card. The other four can be held in his hand, or at his discretion he can attach them to the Straights or Three of a Kind already composed on the table. The ability to collect scraps gives some advantages, but also some disadvantages.

"The advantages are that you can create combinations without the risk of drawing unnecessary cards from the deck. Also, drawing more discards at a time increases the likelihood of high scores. On the other hand, however, it also

FREEDOM

Independence, rejection of ties and impositions. Vagrancy. Modesty.

IDEALISM

Altruism, abstraction. Insurmountable obstacles. Failures. Unfortunate conclusion.

increases the possibility of being left with too many points in hand, if a player closes the game. Because the first purpose of the game is to run out of cards in your hand, remember?"

"It's a very simple game," I said, "but how do you count the points?"

"Counting the score is as simple as the game. Cards numbered 2 to 5 are worth 5 points, cards 6 to 10 are worth 10 points, and picture cards are worth 15 points. The Ace, which is used as a stopgap during the game, is worth 30 points. This is a bit of a crazy card, because it can be stolen by the opposing player who has the card replaced by the Ace, and in this way at the end of the game he grabs those 30 points.

"Then there are the combination prizes. Simple Three of a Kind do not receive any prize, while Full Three of a Kind, i.e. four cards, double the value of the cards that compose them.

"Three-card, four-card and five-card Straights receive no prize, while Six-card Straights double

IMPRISONMENT

Severe punishment, period of constraint. Serious legal or legal impediment.

THE DRILL

School, training one's mental and physical faculties. Good performance.

the value of the cards in which they are composed. The Royal Flush, consisting of King, Queen, Knight, Jack and Ten, also doubles the value of the individual cards.

"Finally, the prize for the one who closes the hand is 50 points, normally, and 100 points in case the winner goes down with all the cards in one go, both in the first hand and during the game. But that's not all. Whoever loses the hand must subtract from the points of the combinations placed on the table, those of the cards left in the hand".

"It's a typical game of luck!" I said.

"To a large extent, yes," replied the junk dealer, "but skill also counts. For example, it is generally not convenient to attach your cards to an opposing player's Straights and Three of a Kind, because this means giving away valuable points. Other times, however, it can be advantageous, if it serves to win the hand. Thus, you earn the Closing Prize. In addition, you have to be very careful how you play the Ace, i.e. the Stopgap, since the

THE DUEL

Clash, bitter conflict. Violent and lasting opposition. Evident hostility. Feud.

BETRAYAL

Hidden dangers, enmities. Unexpected obstacles. Envy, betrayal. Diseases.

outcome of the game can depend on it. Even more attention to the discards, which very often serve the opposing players. Other small nuances are learned by playing, but you will realize that luck is not enough in the game. It also takes imagination and a taste for risk."

"This game attracts me a lot. Why don't we play a game?"

The old man took the watch from the pocket of his waistcoat and looked wearily at the time.

"It's getting late," he said. "We should postpone it to another occasion."

In turn, I looked at the clock and only then did I realize how time had flown by listening to the bizarre fairy tales of the junk dealer. So I got up from the comfortable armchair and, apologizing for the lack of foresight shown, I prepared to leave.

The old man led my way through the forest of messy games. When I reached the door, I greeted very formally and started to go down the stairs.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" he said

FANATICISM

Excessive zeal, partisanship. Limited view of problems. Arrogance, overreaction.

DIPLOMACY

Delegated authority. Good administration. Organizational skills. News.

with a sly smile.

I touched my pockets thoughtfully, then remembered:

"Yes. It's true!" I exclaimed. "The Sichen tarot. But are you sure you want to give them to me? It's really too precious a gift; I don't think I deserve it."

"You never refuse a gift," he replied, "and as to its value, I assure you that your imagination does not yet touch any of the deep mysteries contained in this game. Go now, and I hope you want to meditate on their meaning. This is a treasure that grows by consuming it."

So saying, the junk dealer handed me the tarot bag, and, after warmly bidding me farewell, returned to the house.

THE CONCORD

Friendship, unanimity of consensus. Peaceful solution, tolerance. Brawls quelled.

JUSTICE

Remorse, moral punishment, conscience. Self-criticism. The search for justice.

The Seal of Jaudim

In the following days I reflected at length on the old man's story and on the meaning of those papers. I couldn't help but identify with Sichen, when he lived in the village of Màlicud, in that kind of limbo so far from the problems of the world and so close to that Kingdom of Fantasy from which I, too, growing up, was moving away. At other times, however, I would suspect the prank put in place by my old friend to wake me up from childhood dreams and help me defeat the suggestions produced by excessive fantasy.

Then I took up the cartels again, and I realized the acuteness of their inventor, who in this way had reproduced in a complete way the active and mental life of men, with their vices and virtues. But despite the qualities that I rediscovered with a cool head, that game caused me a disturbing discomfort. I began not to sleep well, and even during the day I felt strange, as if taken by a kind of magnetic current that conditioned my thoughts causing strange illusions.

It had already been a long time since our last meeting when I decided to go and visit my old friend. It was not easy, because the memory of the shocking experience at the second-hand dealer's house instead of fading had become burning. But finally I took courage. I entered the little shop, and as usual I found the old man busy convincing a customer of the magnitude of the deal he was about to conclude. When he saw me, he winked and continued his brilliant conversation. In the end he managed to foist on the unwary customer an impressive amount of junk that he took away triumphantly, as if he had received an inheritance.

As soon as the buyer had left, the old man

came to meet me and greeted me warmly.

"Dear friend!" he exclaimed. "How long has it been since you last showed up!? Has something happened?"

I didn't feel like telling him about the anxieties that had taken hold of me after our last meeting, so I made up the excuse of important school obligations that had kept me very busy. The junk dealer looked me in the eye and I realized how obvious my attempt to cover up reality was. Then I looked down and explained:

"But this is not the only reason. I must confess that thinking back to that afternoon I had moments of profound disorientation. Even of anguish. I even thought of her as some kind of sorcerer. And this fact caused me a deep disturbance. There are moments when I see in an unusual way, more subtle, perhaps, the actions of my friends and the people around me. Other times I feel extremely different from others, I find stupid the things I did until yesterday and that normal people continue to do. At night, I have strange dreams, and sometimes I wake up in the throes of monstrous nightmares. I dream of being chased by gigantic shadows, which penetrate the room from the corners of the walls, or from the drawers. Or I dream of taking flight with immense ease, only to fall from great heights. I had never felt so much discomfort until today, and I decided to go back to visit her to free myself from the weight that oppresses me. I also brought her the papers she gave me. Here they are!"

So saying, I took the tarot bag from my trouser pocket, and with an anxious gesture handed them to the old man.

"I understand your state of mind," he said, smiling benevolently at me. "I too experienced similar moments after I met Sichen. The night I hosted him in my room, as soon as the storm had calmed down, he left, leaving me the seventy-eight little papers as a gift and asking me to keep our

meeting a secret. In the following days, I spent entire afternoons contemplating them. It felt like I had entered a fairytale world like those the old people told during the night vigils. But this was not a fairy tale, and I had proof of it.

"I was fascinated by the mysterious figurines, but soon the euphoria began to turn into a sense of unease, an anxiety that I could not explain. Like you, I had horrible dreams and experienced a long period of depression to which I did not know how to react. At one point I thought of throwing away the tarot, because I had realized that they were the cause of my malaise. But that night, in a dream, Sichen appeared. He sat down on the letto, next to me, and began to speak to me.

"He said he was sorry to see me so upset, but at the same time he was happy about it, because my nervousness revealed, in his opinion, an uncommon sensitivity. If I hadn't reacted in that way, he would certainly have come to take back the cards. You don't give pearls to pigs, he said sternly. I didn't understand what he meant. But Sichen explained to me that the tarot is endowed with immense powers, and that these powers cannot be left free. You need to know how to control them, use them sparingly and respect them as if they were a living being, a kind of Genius who comes to help whenever you need it."

"A genius?!" I exclaimed in amazement. "And how can I get to know him?"

"To get in touch with the Genius and become his master," Sichen replied, "you must first of all immerse yourself in his world and understand its laws. Then you have to understand how the Genius acts and how orders are given to him. It is a long and risky job that can only be tackled with the help of a master."

As Sichen spoke, I was fully aware that I was dreaming, but I also understood that this was not one of the usual dreams. It was the gateway to

Vriak's World. So I knew why Sichen had come to see me. He wanted to offer me his knowledge. The same knowledge thanks to which he had become the Great Wizard of the Gnome People. But before I could say anything, Sichen wanted to warn me. In a grave voice, he said that once I had taken this path I could not back down so lightly, because as it is difficult for a human being to enter the World of Vriak, it is equally difficult to get out of it. At this point I was deeply embarrassed. I knew that, even if it happened in a dream, my decision would be real, and it would affect my life. But curiosity and recklessness prevailed over all logic, and so I accepted.

"Then," said Sichen, "you must be very careful about the instructions I am about to give you, because when you have to carry them out there will be no one to help you."

I nodded my head, and the Magician began:

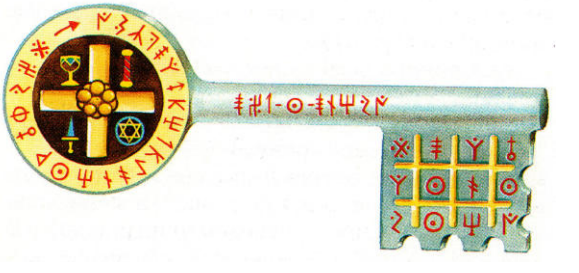
"First of all, you must know that the tarot is a magical tool, and all magical tools must be protected both from external contamination and from energy dispersion. For this reason, they must be placed in a locked wooden box consecrated with the Seal of Jaudìm. Look at it carefully and print it in your mind like a mark of fire."

So saying, Sichen took from his pocket a key on which were engraved the four symbols of the tarot, as well as a strange alphabet and other curious inscriptions.

"This talisman," Sichen continued, "must be drawn on a sheet of white parchment that has been exposed to the light of the June full moon. That same night, together with the parchment, you will spread a blue cloth embroidered with stars on a lawn about one meter wide on each side which will be used to collect the dew. At the first light of dawn, when you pick up the paper and the cloth, you will sing a praise to the Great Thau, to his goodness and his infinite love. On the same day you will have to

finish the next operation.

"First, you'll need to squeeze the fabric and collect the dew water in a bowl. You'll put the cloth to dry, and in the meantime you'll draw the Seal of Jaudim on the scroll, which you'll immediately glue to the inside wall of the box's lid. Then, with your thumb wet with dew, you will place the sign of the cross on all the inside and outside walls of the box, as well as on the lock and key, saying aloud the formula: 'Key to the World of Vriak, close the doors to evil, wherever it comes. Keep away falsehood, disorder, hatred, and wicked temptations. Open the doors to goodness, truth, love and justice, and let no one corrupt your purity. In the name of the Great Thau.'



"Once this is done, you will place the seventy-eight glyphs on the blue cloth and with the liquid you will baptize them by pronouncing the formula:

'Ears of the Genie of Vriak, listen to my command. Eyes of the Genius of Vriak, open to my command. Lips of the Genius of Vriak, speak at my command. Tell me the things you see. Tell me the things you hear. Penetrate time and bring me the signs. I ask you in the name of the Great Thau.'

"Once this is done, you will use some of the fabric to stuff the walls of the box, also covering the Seal of Jaudim. With the remaining fabric you will make a large handkerchief with which you will wrap the tarot cards. Then you will put them back in the box and lock it by saying only the first part of

the formula:

'Vriak's Key to the World, close the doors etc...'

When you open the box, you'll only say the second part of the formula:

'Vriak's Key to the World, open the doors, etc. ..'

"Finally, you will have to be careful not to throw away even a piece of fabric. All the leftovers are burned and the ashes mixed with the remaining dew water. With the poultice obtained you will draw a cross inside a circle on the outer bottom of the box. On the outside of the four segments you will write the letters A, Z, O. T of the magic alphabet, and you will draw another circle that encloses the entire figure, marking the circumference with a clearly visible point. From this moment on, you can begin the study of the twenty-two Major Glyphs and the fifty-six Minor Glyphs. When you know what they mean, you can summon Vriak's Genie and ask him any questions.

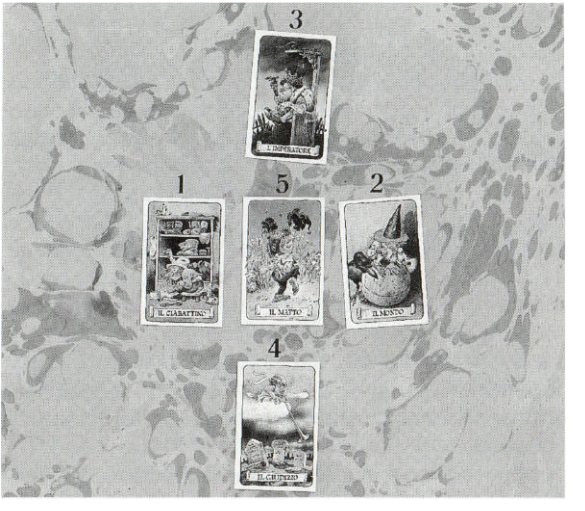
"If you have respected the rituals and meditated enough on each card, the Genie will solve all your doubts. It will introduce you to all kinds of things past, present, and future, but that are not contrary to the Great Thau. It will teach you how to prevent all Necromancy and Black Magic operations. It will open people's hearts to you, revealing their most intimate secrets. It will help you discover all kinds of treasures, as long as they are not guarded by any magical seal. But the most important thing it will teach you, is the road that leads to the Great Thau.

"These and other wonderful things you can learn from Vriak's Genie. if the Great Thau I wants. But now pay close attention to my words, and try to impress on your memory the meaning of the tarot."

Sichen thus began to explain the seventy-eight cards to me one by one, indicating their numerical, alphabetical and symbolic value, valid in the World of Esir as well as in that of men. At the

end of the very long exposition I remained silent for a few minutes, trying to rearrange my ideas. I had been very attentive to Sichen's instructions, but I did not understand how the Genie of Vriak could answer my questions. I tried to ask the gnome but he. as if he had guessed my doubts he said:

"The Genius will speak through the mouth of the tarot. As I explained to you, each card has a secret meaning, indeed, a series of meanings that, added together, will produce answers so clear that you will feel like you are reading a book. But to do this you need to know how to open the pages of the book, and above all how to arrange them. There are many reading systems and I will point out some of them, but later it will be Vriak's Genius who will teach you others, from time to time more complex



and precise."

The Polar Cross

The first way, which we will call the Polar Cross, is the simplest of all and allows the Genius to

answer a precise question, formulated in a very clear way. Before opening the tarot box, however, you must remember the formula for opening, while before using them you must pronounce the formula of invocation to the Genie. Once the question has been established, the Major Glyphs are shuffled seven times, the deck is cut in two and the same operation is repeated two more times. Then the glyphs are spread on the blue handkerchief and four are chosen, arranging them in the shape of a cross.

"The first glyph extracted expresses the present situation by indicating its main characteristics. The second glyph indicates oppositions of any kind: practical, psychological or magical. The third glyph indicates the favorable elements, already present or to be sought: people, things, mental attitudes or ritual ceremonies. The fourth glyph offers a general assessment of the situation following the introduction of the favorable elements. To know the definitive answer of the Genius of Vriak, however, it is necessary to look for the fifth glyph. It is obtained by adding the numerical values of the first four. If the resulting figure is greater than 22, a Magic Reduction must be performed. In practice, the number 21 is subtracted

from the total digit, until it falls within the scale of values from 1 to 22. For example, if the sum is 45, we will make 45-21 = 24; 24 - 21 = 3. The number obtained, 5. it will be the glyph with which the Genius of Vriak offers the final response, that is, a judgment projected into the future. This method can be applied multiple times to the same problem. asking the Engineers further questions that progressively define all aspects of the issue that is intended to be clarified".

The procedure did not seem difficult to me, but I could not imagine when the Genius could intervene, and I told him.

"You will learn this in due course. For now, it is enough for you to know that the most correct and coherent meaning only the Genius I can suggest to you, and I do it in a subtle way, whispering in your mind unfinished sentences or simple concepts. These impressions, however, only make sense by reading them all together, as if they were detached pieces of a puzzle. When you have become familiar with the Genius you will understand better what I mean. For now, you have to remember the systems and learn how to use them by practicing often."

If I could have listened to my curiosity, I would have put the method I had just learned into practice at once, but Sichen reminded me that the night is short, and it was necessary to use the dream to learn the theory. So he went on to explain:

"This other method is more complex, since the Minor Glyphs are also used."

The Cardinal Cross

"It serves to clarify a problem regarding a specific area of life, analyzing it along its timeline. Before starting, therefore, one must choose one of the three suits: Rods for work matters, Coins for

business. Cups for love or family matters. Swords for legal issues. First of all, you mix the Major Glyphs seven times by three as in the previous game and choose four: the first represents the recent past, the second expresses the present situation, the third is a tip to face the future, the fourth represents the future itself.

"At the end of this preliminary, the Minor Glyphs are shuffled seven times by three and four are chosen. The first represents what has conditioned the past, and must be placed under the first major glyph. The second represents influences on present life and should be placed between the second and third major glyphs. The third minor glyph represents the events that will condition the future, and must be placed together with the fourth major glyph. In this way, the Genius answers quite precisely to every question that is put to him. If, on the other hand, you want to get more general information about the different aspects of life, you can use another method."

The Checkerboard Method

"To put it into practice, it is necessary to mix the seventy-eight glyphs with the usual system. Then eighteen cards are drawn, arranging them in three rows of six cards each. The first row is related to the past, the second to the present and the third to the future.

"Individually, however, the first card of each row talks about work; the second of ambitions; the third of friendship; the fourth of love; the fifth of health; the sixth in the family. For each topic there will therefore be three maps that must be read in chronological order, in order to clarify the changes that have occurred over time and the reasons that have determined them."

The Genius of Vriak

As the dream continued, I felt increasingly drawn to the fantastic revelations of the Gnome Wizard. But the more Sichen spoke, the more my desire to experiment with his magic grew. At a certain point, Sichen, without me having asked him anything, invited me to ask a question. I was astonished by this offer, then I thought for a moment and asked:

"Will I ever be able to become a Great Wizard?"

Sichen smiled kindly and said:

"This impatience should be punished, but since I have been the cause of your curiosity, I feel compelled to satisfy you. For such a question, it will be necessary to use the Greater Glyphs."

The gnome took the twenty-two figures and mentally repeated the magic formula:

"Ears of the Genie of Vriafe, listen to my command. Eyes of the Genius of Vriafe, open to my command. Lips of the Genius of Vriafe, speak at my command. Tell me the things you see. Tell me about the voices you hear. Penetrate time and bring back the signs. In the name of the Great Thau".

After shuffling the cards seven times, he had the pile cut into me. He repeated this operation twice more, very slowly, as if he were in a state of hypnosis. Then he opened the fan cards and invited me to choose four. Then, with a trembling hand, I touched the hole cards and chose those that seemed to emanate a kind of warmth. I arranged them in a cross on the table, as Sichen had taught me, then the gnome turned them over, pronouncing aloud the name and function of each:

"The card that represents you is the High Priestess, while the one that opposes your ambitions is the Devil... The card that offers you advice is the Hermit. Finally, the judgment is expressed by the figure of Death."

"Death?" I exclaimed, frightened. "No thanks. I don't like this game anymore. I prefer to live a normal existence, like all my kind, rather than become a great sage destined to suffer the punishment of hell!"

"I see that you have not listened to my instructions," said Sichen, smiling. "If you had paid a little more attention, you would remember that the glyph of Death only rarely represents the end of life. Rather, it means a sudden change, a profound transformation of material and intellectual life. It will be your job to make sure that this change takes place under a positive sign."

"And how should I do it?" I asked in amazement.

"First of all," replied the gnome, "you should let me finish this game and wait until I have given a definitive answer to your question." So saying, Sichen began to think, weighing the four cards one by one, muttering and snorting, while I anxiously awaited an answer that would melt away my anxieties. After a few minutes, the gnome finally decided to give me the answer.

"I have finished," he said, letting out a long sigh. "Now be very careful about the things I am

going to tell you, for they are instructions of great importance. In first place came the High Priestess. It is truly a good omen for those who, like you, are about to embark on the path of magic. The High Priestess generically represents the search for secret truths, inspiration, but above all the study of religious sciences and magical arts. With his right hand he holds ajar the book of mysteries that you will never be able to fully understand if you do not lift the veil that covers the altar behind him.

"It is a clear allusion to High Magic, or Sacred Art, which you will have to study at the end of your apprenticeship. The Devil in second place speaks of inner turmoil, powerful temptations, immoral actions and generically self-centeredness. The Devil is also the card of Necromantic Magic and Sacrilegious Arts. This glyph is a clear warning to maintain conduct appropriate to your purpose. Therefore, you will have to carefully avoid blasphemous books. But that's not all. You'll have to be careful not to get overwhelmed by successes. By bragging about your acquired powers, or misusing your knowledge, you could destroy your wealth over time in a flash. If this were to happen, no Genie could save you from the Abyss.

"The third card is the Hermit. This old man with a stern look advises to move with caution, because the path that leads to knowledge is fraught with dangers that await the aspiring Magician at every step. Pride, vanity, and conceit can cause you to stumble, while fear, recklessness, and stubbornness can cause you to deviate from righteousness. Therefore distrust certainties, reject flattery and remember that silence is one of the most powerful weapons of the wise. Only by acting cautiously will you be able to continue your search. Study and try but keep quiet about your ambitions. Follow the light that is hidden within you, and your way will be as bright as the sun.

Now let's see the fourth card... death. This

glyph means, as I have already told you, an abrupt change, perhaps unexpected but perhaps expected, or even sought by magical means. In fact, Death is the obligatory passage for those who aspire to magical knowledge. Therefore, when you reach the end of your apprenticeship, you will have to decide between two paths. The first will allow you to abandon the search and return to the condition of a layman. The second will allow you to enter the funeral crypt to continue your journey into the world of the dead.

In that case, if and when you are resurrected into the light you will be a regenerated being. You will choose another name and you can start building your inner Temple. But let's look for the last card, so we will know the definitive answer to your question."

As Sichen revealed the meaning of the glyphs, I began to understand that the science I aspired to is not the game I had imagined: the laboratory, the tools. the odd formulas, the bizarre ingredients. I realized that it is something greater and more powerful, because it involves the entire body, spirit and soul of the magician, and the idea of putting my whole self on the line began to frighten me. Meanwhile, the gnome was finishing his calculations.

"So, the High Priestess wears the number 2, plus the Devil who wears the 15. plus the Hermit 9. plus Death 13. The total is 39, from which we subtract 21. 18 remains, which is the number of the Moon. This glyph speaks of visions, superstitions and indiscreet curiosities, and also of adventurous journeys, dangerous searches and strange encounters. The Moon is the symbol of the dark places of the mind, the forbidden regions of memory where the most secret fears and the most murky passions are stirred. Traveling under the Moon therefore means venturing into one's soul to seek the great sea of childhood. Therefore I tell you

that following a magical ceremony, represented by Death, you will penetrate the World of Esir. But I already warn you against the risks of such an adventure.

"In the darkness of your mind you will encounter spirits, demons and larvae that will try to hold you back, confuse you, or harm you. They will use any means to prevent you from reaching your goal. It will be a terrible ordeal, but remember that one of those spirits will become your Genie of Esirk. You will have to recognize him, fight with him and make him your slave, because only he can show you the way out of that terrible world and come to contemplate the Sun rising east of the Duash Meadow. This is what is written in the last glyph."

Sichen picked up the cards, shuffled them with the rest of the deck, and looked at me without saying anything else. After a few minutes of silence, having thought carefully over the words of the Gnome Wizard, I decided to speak:

"I don't understand," I said with a confused air, "the Genio has not answered my question. Isn't it possible to ask him to be more precise?"

"You are mistaken," replied Sichen. "This was exactly the answer you wanted, as the drawn cards were these and meant nothing else. Therefore, you would do well not to underestimate their value. The path you are about to take is risky. You might not even pass the tests you will be called to, and I assure you that mistakes in High Magic burn more than fire."

These words caused me even greater trouble. The fear of getting lost in an underground world or, even worse, the idea of facing the diabolical beings that populate it, induced me to a state of deep anguish. While I was dreaming, I tossed and turned in the letto in a feverish agitation. I thought of the torture and suffering that awaited me if by misfortune I failed such a terrible examination. So I

decided to live a quiet life and gave up on the path indicated by Sichen. I explained my fears to the gnome, and he asked me if I was convinced of my choice. I nodded sadly, apologizing for my weakness, but Sichen would hear no apology. He got up from his bed and said:

"Then I have nothing more to tell you. My lesson is over. Before I say goodbye, though, I want you to grab a card from the Greater Glyphs deck. This time I want to be the one to get rid of a curiosity."

The gnome shuffled the cards as usual, pronouncing the command formula to Vriak's Genius. Slowly, I passed my hand over the fan he offered me and while I was pulling out a card, another fell to the ground, as if attracted by a magnetic force. I looked first at the glyph in my hand. It was the Judgment. Then Sichen knelt down to pick up the other and handed it to me. He was the Hanged Man. Not knowing the question the gnome was mentally asking, I couldn't understand the meaning of the glyphs. So I asked what they meant. Smiling, the gnome answered:

"It doesn't matter if you know. What is already written will not change because of this. In due time, you'll know it's time to leave, but don't go to the appointment if you're not confident. Now I have to go. I gladly leave you the tarot, because I know that you will be able to make good use of it. Farewell, my friend!"

So saying, Sichen vanished into thin air and I woke up with a start, as if I had fallen from the lect. I was drenched in sweat and my heart was pounding, while a high-pitched hiss buzzed in my head. I struggled a lot to realize that I had dreamed, so intense had my emotions been. Slowly, I got up from the letto and went to the window. The night was still deep and myriads of stars shone in the sky. I was enchanted to observe that grandiose, monotonous spectacle:

"Up there, lost among those lights is the World of Esir," I thought, "and even further away the dimension of Vriafe, where Sichen met his beloved."

A sense of nostalgia assailed me, shaking my soul, and I began to cry. I wish my gnome friend was still with me talking about his fantastic world and teaching me his strange science. Then. thinking better, I told myself that it had been a dream, a beautiful dream, and I went back to letto. At that moment I saw two carts on the blanket. I looked at them smiling, and while I was holding them to my chest I fell asleep.

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